Community engagement and local government

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Alison M. Bradford

27 July 2016
Publications and Conferences

Abstract

Community engagement refers to the processes by which public authorities provide opportunities for the community to participate in and influence government decision making. Community engagement is practised in democratic governments in many countries. Legislation specifies the minimum requirements of local governments in New South Wales Australia to involve the community in decision making. Further to legal requirements, the demonstrated success of community engagement, identified benefits and increasing community expectations continue to be key motivators for government to develop and implement effective community engagement policies.

Generating community interest and participation in community engagement initiatives can be viewed as a marketing challenge, with local governments needing to communicate and promote engagement initiatives effectively, motivate community members to take action by becoming involved, and maintain their involvement. Of particular relevance is the concept of relationship marketing, the effectiveness of which relies on commitment and trust between two parties (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Trust and commitment are essential for the positive relational exchange needed for community engagement, both of which are directly influenced by shared meaning.

Local governments often make use of theoretical frameworks to guide the development of community engagement initiatives, such as the IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum. The Spectrum was developed to provide practitioners consistency in community engagement language and is the most widely used framework for community engagement by local governments in Australia. However, to this point the meaning community stakeholders assign to community engagement
has not previously been identified and so the extent to which shared meaning exists between local government and community stakeholders is currently unknown. This study addresses this gap in knowledge. To do so, the following research questions were posed:

1. What meaning does local government assign to community engagement?
2. What meaning do community stakeholders assign to community engagement?
3. To what extent does shared meaning exist?

The research was undertaken using an interpretative phenomenological approach. In-depth interviews were conducted with purposefully selected stakeholders from the Wollongong local government area, in New South Wales Australia. Wollongong City Council, the local government authority, has a community engagement focus and has been acknowledged internationally for its community engagement initiatives. The Council’s community engagement policy and practice are formulated on the IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum.

Findings revealed shared meaning between Wollongong City Council and community stakeholder exists regarding aspects of community engagement such as definition, the value of community engagement and acknowledgment of challenges within the process of engaging with the community. Shared meaning did not extend to all levels of the IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum. Results highlight a lack of shared meaning regarding the stages ‘inform’ and ‘involve’ on the Spectrum. In addition, findings revealed non-alignment between community stakeholders and Council in terms of understanding how decisions are made and how participation influences Council decision making.
A model is proposed based on Council and community stakeholders’ shared meaning of community engagement. The ‘Model of Community Engagement in Local Government’, moves away from a level or staged approach to recognise community stakeholder involvement as a fluid process, which may see varying involvement at different stages of the decision making process. Additionally, an illustrative tool has been developed to provide greater understanding of the decision making process within the context of local government. Findings revealed community stakeholders had limited understanding of Council’s decision making process and how their input might affect decisions. The tool aims to improve attitudes towards community engagement through building a common understanding, in turn increasing trust.

The research offers both theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, findings provide empirical evidence regarding the meaning community stakeholders assign to community engagement. A model for the implementation of community engagement in the context of local government is introduced and discussed. The model is developed based on shared meaning, therefore providing a foundation for effective community engagement and the implementation relationship marketing strategies. Further, to address the lack of understanding of the decision making process established by the study, a marketing tool is presented which can be used to provide greater understanding of the decision making process within the context of local government. The research contributes to understanding the relationship between marketing and community engagement within a local government context. The study highlights the potential for relationship marketing and social marketing concepts to contribute positively to the goal of effective community engagement. Practically, the findings and recommendations provide insight to local governments
on how to utilise marketing strategies to engage the community in decision making processes. The findings contribute to more robust community engagement policy and guides the development of community engagement training programs. This in turn, increases the effectiveness of decision making processes and offers potential benefits for Councils, participants and the community.
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I dedicate this thesis to my Gran, if only I could show you what I achieved.
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Chapter One – Introduction

Community engagement refers to the interaction by which those with decision making power provide opportunities for members of the public to participate in and influence the decision making process. The relevance and application of community engagement is demonstrated in democratic governments in many countries. This research explores community engagement in the context of local-level government. Chapter One provides background to the concept of community engagement including its history, benefits and objectives. The purpose of the research is introduced and the research questions and study design are explained. The theoretical and practical contributions are also stated and the structure of the thesis is presented at the conclusion of the chapter.

1.1 Background

public elections, many current democratic governments provide the community with regular opportunities during the term of government to participate in decision making.

It has been suggested community participation in decision making is a right (Summerville et al., 2008, p. 696), however, until the 1960s, prior to the release of the Skeffington Report, in London, England in 1968, decisions were primarily made by those in positions of power (Wilson, 1999). The report, explored in more detail in Chapter Two, demonstrated the positive outcomes of involving community in decisions made by local government (Town Planning Institute, 1968). As a result, local governments in England introduced new processes to involve community members in decision making (Wilson, 1999, p. 247).

In Australia, the Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government suggests ‘engagement is at the heart of what council is designed to do’ (Herriman, 2011, p. 62). Local government is one of three tiers which form the structure of government in Australia, the other two being state and federal. ‘Council’ is another term used interchangeably for local government and will be used in this research. Figure 1-1 illustrates the three tiers of government, yellow dots are used to represent the approximate geographical location of the governing body’s office. Local government is responsible for decisions affecting smaller geographical area such as towns. State government is responsible for decisions which guide each of the eight Australian states and territories, while the Australian federal government is responsible for decisions which govern the country.
Excluding the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), all states and territories in Australia have Acts which prescribe the role of local government in making decisions, providing services and representing the interests of their communities. The Acts describe the ‘need for local government to engage within the community and to encourage and assist participation’ (Herriman, 2011, p. 62). While community engagement has relevance and application to levels of democratic government in many countries, this research focuses on local government in New South Wales (NSW), Australia.

The NSW Local Government Act (1993) (Parliamentary Counsel’s Office, 1993) stipulates the range of responsibilities of local government within the state of NSW, including the requirement for Council meetings to be publicised, open to the public and reports and minutes of meetings to be made publicly available. The Act recognises the role of community as ‘participating in Council community engagement activities including by making submissions to the Council and comments on, or objections to, proposals relating to those matters’ (Parliamentary Counsel’s Office, 1993). The positive disposition of state government in New South Wales towards community engagement is apparent with the introduction of laws
which strengthen the engagement requirements of local government. These include
the Local Government Amendment (Planning and Reporting) Act 2009
(Parliamentary Counsel’s Office, 2009) and the Planning Administration Bill 2013
(Parliamentary Counsel’s Office, 2013). As a result, Council must meet mandatory
community engagement requirements regarding Council meetings, strategic planning
and development decisions.

Among decision makers and researchers, there is support for the notion that active
community participation enables people to acquire many of the capabilities and
qualities required for a well-functioning democracy (Putnam, 1992). There are
benefits for government, communities and participants of community engagement
activities (Herriman, 2011, Martin and Eversole, 2005, Wollongong City Council,
2010, Wollongong City Council, 2013). These benefits are acknowledged by
academic research (Herriman, 2011, Winstanley and Cronin, 2012) and include
creating an environment where people feel included in their community and
increasing representation and involvement of the public in decision making.
Community engagement has the potential to improve the quality and legitimacy of
decisions made, and contribute to enhanced governance (Baker et al., 2006, Barnes et
al., 2003, Eversole, 2011). When suggestions are proposed by the community, the
likelihood they meet the community’s needs is increased. Additionally, community
engagement may enhance public acceptance of Council decisions and policies. As
Eversole (2011, p. 55) suggests, while there is increasing political pressure by
communities to participate, the government can harness the energy and knowledge of
participants and the community engagement process can result in community ‘buy
in’ on decisions. Communities consist of diverse people with some common interests
and provide a plethora of backgrounds and experiences organisations can tap into (Barbaro, 2006, p. 48). Councils have found involving the community in decision making processes has resulted in reduced delivery times and budget savings (Herriman, 2011, International Association for Public Participation, 2006), while other research reveals people who participate in community engagement activities experience benefits related to their physical and mental health (Attree et al., 2011). Overall, participation is a way to improve the relationship between the community and local government (Baker et al., 2006, p. 5). The demonstrated success of community engagement, identified benefits and increasing community expectations continue to be key motivators for government in New South Wales, and Australia overall, to develop and implement effective community engagement policies (Barbaro, 2006, Herriman, 2011).

While it is a legislative requirement that local governments undertake community engagement, the methods, practices and governing documents used are determined by each Council. As a result, ‘the ways in which Councils engage with their communities vary considerably’ (Herriman, 2011, p. 10). In order to fulfil their responsibilities effectively, Councils often make use of theoretical frameworks to formulate community engagement strategies. Frameworks have been developed which describe, analyse and emphasise key elements of the engagement process. These frameworks provide a greater understanding of community engagement and seek to increase consistency in terms of policy development and implementation. They also serve as tools for eliciting greater structure in the community engagement process (Bracht and Tsouros, 1990). The frameworks are typically presented as a ladder, a continuum or a spectrum. Examples include the Ladder of Citizen
Participation (Arnstein, 1969), the Public Participation Ladder (Wiedemann and Femers, 1993), the Ladder of Citizen Empowerment (Burns, 1994), the Ladder of Participation (Wilson, 1999), the Ladder of Empowerment (Rocha, 1997), the Public Participation Continuum (Cogan and Sharpe, 1986) and the IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum (International Association for Public Participation, 2007).

The IAP2 Public Participations Spectrum is the most widely used framework by local governments in Australia, and while it has been criticised, it does provide practitioners with a common language through which community engagement strategies can be formulated (Herriman, 2011). Compared to other frameworks, the IAP2 spectrum provides clearer aims and direction regarding the community engagement process. Clarity regarding community engagement is essential to achieving positive outcomes and building stronger relationships, which are fundamental to meaningful and effective community engagement (Kagan et al., 2005). The International Association of Public Participation (IAP2) identified the need for consistency in community engagement language and practice (International Association for Public Participation), and in response to this need, developed a continuum-style approach to defining community engagement called the IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum. This Spectrum provides the theoretical framework for the present study and is discussed further in Chapter Two.

The IAP2 organisation is an ‘international network of members who seek to promote and improve the practice of public participation in relation to individuals, governments, institutions, and other entities that affect the public interest in nations throughout the world’ (International Association for Public Participation, 2014). IAP2 is a not-for-profit organisation founded in 1990. With affiliates in 26 countries.
(International Association for Public Participation, 2014) it is the prevalent organisation in the field of community engagement (Herriman, 2011) and offers events, services and support for community engagement practitioners. The organisation works with the Journal of Public Deliberation and facilitates ongoing research in the field of community engagement.

To further facilitate consistency in community engagement language and delivery the Spectrum is supplemented by the IAP2’s core values for the practice of public participation, IAP2’s Code of Ethics for the Public Participation Practitioner and the tools and techniques for undertaking engagement activities (International Association of Public Participation, 2014).

1.2 Research setting

This research was undertaken in the local government area of Wollongong in New South Wales Australia. The population of the Wollongong local government area is currently around 200,000. Of current Wollongong residents, almost one quarter (23 per cent) was born overseas, with 16 per cent originating from Europe (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011). The local government authority is Wollongong City Council which has a workforce of approximately 1,000 full-time equivalent positions and an annual expenditure in the vicinity of AU$240 million (Wollongong City Council, 2015). Wollongong City Council was chosen as the location for this study because of its accessibility to the researcher, and because of the organisation’s demonstrated commitment to community engagement including the adoption of the IAP2 Spectrum in their Community Engagement Policy (Wollongong City Council, 2013).
Wollongong City Council has a community engagement focus and has been acknowledged internationally for its community engagement initiatives (International Association for Public Participation). First adopted in 2005 (Wollongong City Council, 2005), Council’s Community Engagement Policy describes the methods and processes to be followed to ensure the community has ‘input and participation in to visioning and planning projects across the City of Wollongong’ (Wollongong City Council, 2005, p. 4). The policy was reviewed in 2008, 2010 and 2013, and the most recent version includes a modified version of the IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum.

Wollongong City Council has adopted a Community Strategic Plan (Wollongong City Council, 2012c) as an outcome of the Local Government Amendment (Planning and Reporting) Act (2009). The document details the 10-year vision and goals for the local government area resulting from an engagement process undertaken during 2010-2011. The fourth goal is to be ‘a connected and engaged community’ and includes the following objectives:

1. ‘Residents are able to have their say through increased engagement opportunities and take an active role in decisions that affect our city.

2. Our residents feel an increased sense of community.

3. Residents have easy and equitable access to information resources and services.

4. Our local Council has the trust of the community’ (Wollongong City Council, 2012c p. 17).

The goal and associated objectives reflect identified community aspirations regarding community engagement within the Wollongong local government area.
Generating community interest and participation in community engagement initiatives can be viewed as a marketing challenge, with local governments needing to communicate and promote the engagement initiatives effectively, motivate community members to become involved, and maintain their engagement and involvement for as long as possible. The latter has similarities with the notion of relationship marketing, which focuses on relationship rather than transactions, the effectiveness of which relies on shared meaning, commitment and trust (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). The necessity of meaning alignment among stakeholders is made apparent through Commitment-Trust Theory (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Morgan and Hunt (1994) demonstrated shared values, or meaning, is the key variable which impacts upon both trust and commitment, each of which contributes to the success or failure of a relationship. For this reason Commitment-Trust Theory, positioned within the context of relationship marketing, forms the theoretical framework for this investigation. By understanding the meaning assigned by community stakeholders to community engagement and its alignment with the intended meaning, that of the IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum, governments will be better equipped to design appropriate community engagement policies and implement marketing strategies for the achievement of meaningful community engagement.

1.3 Purpose of the research
Local governments in New South Wales are legally required to involve the community in decision making. Some are motivated to implement community engagement activities beyond legislative requirements in order to harness the benefits to both Council and the community, discussed in Chapter Two. To develop the relationships which are central to community engagement initiatives, local
governments are developing strategies, allocating resources, attracting attention and creating interest amongst community members. The process is closely related to the concept of relationship marketing, and alignment of meaning is the foundation of successful relationships (Morgan and Hunt, 1994).

Notwithstanding the volume of different terms and theoretical frameworks discussed earlier in this chapter, there is a need to ensure the stakeholders have shared meaning as to the role and objectives of community engagement – a key ingredient for commitment and trust and, in turn, more effective government. The present study sought to understand the meaning stakeholders assign to community engagement, determine where alignment does and does not exist and discuss the implications in relation to community engagement literature, theory and practice. Findings contribute to the body of research on community engagement more broadly, and community engagement within the context of local government specifically.

Analysis of the meanings assigned by community stakeholders and Council to the components of the IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum will enable a critique of the Spectrum and development of recommendations for improvement. Practically, governments can utilise results to guide policy development, develop community engagement training programs and implement resource kits which are founded on a common understanding of community engagement. Overall, findings will help facilitate relationships between Council and community members which are built on a foundation of shared meaning, increasing trust and commitment.
1.4 Research questions

This research addresses the following questions:

1. What meaning does local government assign to community engagement?
2. What meaning do community stakeholders assign to community engagement?
3. To what extent does shared meaning exist?

1.5 Research design

The research was undertaken in two phases. Phase One involved a review of relevant documents and archives relating to community engagement within Wollongong City Council. A key employee of the Council was interviewed in order to validate the archival review findings and source insights regarding the experience of the organisation.

Phase Two investigated community stakeholders’ perceptions of the meaning of community engagement, based upon their experiences. Phenomenological research methodology was employed which questions how individuals make sense of the world (Connelly, 2010). The methodology focuses on people’s experience and understanding as a way of comprehending the world as they interact within it. Its relevance and application to this study are discussed in Chapter Three.

The design of this research was based on a five stage process for conducting a phenomenological study (Creswell, 2007). The first step involved determining the appropriate phenomenological approach. Second, the researcher ascertained the phenomena applicable to the research questions. Third, data was collected from individuals who have experienced the phenomena. This is generally by means of in-depth interviews, however can include other methods such as observation and
journals. The fourth step involved data analysis, a process which includes identifying clusters of meaning and the emergence of themes. Finally, the essence of the phenomena was established and presented.

When determining the phenomenological approach, consideration was given to the goal of interpretative inquiry. The goal is to identify participants’ meanings from the blend of the researcher’s understanding of the phenomenon, participant-generated information, and data obtained from other relevant sources. Interpretive phenomenology is grounded in the belief that the researcher and the participants come to the investigation with fore structures of understanding shaped by their respective backgrounds, and in the process of interaction and interpretation, they co-generate an understanding of the phenomenon being studied. The goal of interpretive phenomenology aligns with the research objective and questions, and therefore was determined to be the approach most suitable for this study.

Data analysis included a five-step process developed through review of Creswell (2007), Diekelman Allen and Tanner (1989), Moustakas (1994) and Polkinghorne (1989). The first step involved the researcher becoming immersed in the data to identify significant statements, sentences and quotes. The researcher created clusters of meaning from the significant statements and from these forged themes. A description of the participant’s experience was written based on the significant statements and themes, and texts were compared to identify and describe shared experiences, common meanings and patterns. Finally, the ‘essence’ of the phenomenon as understood from the common experiences was presented. Chapter Three provides a detailed explanation of the method of enquiry.
1.6 Contributions

The research provides both theoretical and practical contributions.

1.6.1 Theoretical contributions

The research contributes to marketing and community engagement literature, highlighting the relationship between marketing and community engagement. The data collected through this research establishes the understanding of community engagement from community stakeholders’ perspectives and was used to analyse the alignment of meaning with the IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum. The data collected through this research was used to analyse the alignment of meaning with the IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum. Based on findings, (1) the Spectrum has been critiqued and non-alignments in meaning established. (2) A new model for community engagement in the local government context is presented. Further, (3) a tool has been developed which addresses community stakeholders’ desire to have a greater understanding of the decision making process in regards to community involvement and how feedback is used.

1.6.2 Practical contributions

Practically, findings and recommendations can be used by local governments to (1) improve the effectiveness of community engagement policies and decision making processes within local government. (2) Insights on how local governments can improve marketing and communications with the community are presented. Further, (3) the importance and potential benefits of marketing as a key part of the community engagement process is substantiated. In turn, (4) improvements will create benefits for community stakeholders and the community through improved relationships, increased representation and involvement in decision making.
1.7 Thesis structure

This thesis is organised into six chapters. The title and purpose of each chapter is illustrated in Figure 1-2.

**Figure 1-2: Overview of thesis structure**

Chapter One provides an introduction to the study topic and establishes the background to community engagement within the context of local government in Australia. Research questions are presented and the research design introduced. The theoretical and practical contributions are also explained.
Chapter Two provides a review of the literature and establishes the context of community engagement for the purposes of the study. Relevant definitions and theoretical frameworks are explored and the language of community engagement explained. The history of community engagement and relevant government legislation is also presented. This is followed by an explanation of relationship marketing and Commitment-Trust Theory and their relevance to this study (Morgan and Hunt, 1994), as well as the significance of shared meaning as a means of establishing and maintaining effective relationships.

Chapter Three details the method of enquiry used to undertake the study, with phenomenology presented as the guiding methodology. Methodological details are provided in relation to the population being studied, sampling, recruitment, data collection, data analysis and integrity in qualitative research. The chapter concludes with an exploration of ethical considerations.

Chapter Four presents the findings of the study in two sections. The first section presents the results and addresses the first research question what meaning does local government assign to community engagement? The second section provides an overview of the information provided by participants. During interviews, participants shared their experiences of community engagement and local government and eight themes were identified that reflect these experiences. The eight themes are discussed and the second research question what meaning do community stakeholders assign to community engagement is addressed?

Chapter Five focuses on the discussion of results. The meaning Wollongong City Council and community stakeholders assign to community engagement is deliberated. Shared meaning is then considered in the context of community
engagement in a local government setting and methods to increase alignment offered. A new model for community engagement in the context of local government is introduced and discussed.

Finally, Chapter Six provides a summary of the research. An overview of community engagement in the context of local government is presented as understood through the study. The strengths and limitations of the research are presented and the implications of the research, both theoretical and practical, are offered. The chapter concludes with recommendations for future research.

1.8 Chapter summary

The chapter provided an introduction to the study. The background of community engagement was presented and the current environment discussed. The purpose of the research and methodology was introduced and the research questions were presented. The chapter concluded with an overview of the thesis structure. The next chapter provides a review of the literature and establishes the context of community engagement for the purposes of the study.
Chapter Two – Literature Review

Relevant definitions, theoretical frameworks and community engagement language are presented in this chapter. The absence of research concerning the meaning of community engagement from community stakeholders’ perspectives is identified and the consequence of this is discussed from a relationship marketing perspective, Commitment-Trust Theory.

2.1 Introduction

In order to fulfil their responsibility effectively, Councils are making use of theoretical frameworks to formulate community engagement strategies. Frameworks have been developed to identify key elements of the engagement process, and provide terms and definitions. The literature and related frameworks do not, however, provide insight into what meaning community stakeholders assign to community engagement. It is the objective of this thesis to address this shortcoming, because by understanding the meaning community stakeholders assign to community engagement areas of alignment or non-alignment can be identified.

The necessity of meaning alignment among community engagement stakeholders is made apparent through Commitment-Trust Theory (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Commitment-Trust Theory (Morgan and Hunt, 1994) is positioned within the realm of relationship marketing. The impact of shared values, including meaning, are posited as the key variable impacting trust and commitment. The effectiveness of trust and commitment directly contribute to the success or failure of a relationship. By understanding the degree of alignment between intended and actual meanings
associated with community engagement, governments will be better equipped to
design and implement community engagement.

This literature review provides an introduction to community engagement and its
grounding in Social Contract Theory (Rousseau, 1762), democracy and
governmentality (Foucault, 1978 [2001]). The history of community engagement and
associated government legislation is presented. This is followed by an overview of
relationship marketing, and within this focus is then directed to Commitment-Trust
Theory (Morgan and Hunt, 1994) and the significance of shared meaning towards
establishing and maintaining effective relationships.

2.2 Terminology

A range of terms are used to describe the interaction between governments and
community stakeholders with relation to decision making. Table 2-1 provides these
definitions and illustrates the lack of a common definition to describe the process of
involving the community in decision making.

Table 2-1: Overview of definitions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arnstein (1969, p. 216)</td>
<td>‘When [citizens] are proffered by power holders as the total extent of participation, citizens may indeed hear and be heard. But under these conditions they lack the power to insure that their views will be heeded by the powerful’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elton Consulting (2003, p. 6)</td>
<td>‘The way in which organisations seek the views of particular stakeholders or the wider public in order to improve a project or outcome’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eversole (2012, p. 31)</td>
<td>‘A means of legitimating already-taken decisions’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International Association for Public Participation (2007)</td>
<td>‘To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NSW Government (2012, p. 38)</td>
<td>‘...to consider comments from the public before adopting…’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wollongong City</td>
<td>‘is a term that describes the ways in which Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Source</td>
<td>Definition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Council (2010, p. 2)</td>
<td>interacts with the community and the processes and practices that Council uses…’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arnstein (1969, p. 216)</td>
<td>‘A categorical term for citizen power. It is the redistribution of power that enables the have-not citizens, presently excluded from the political and economic processes, to be deliberately included in the future’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elton Consulting (2003, p. 6)</td>
<td>‘More active processes in which the public is given a greater role in formulating plans or influencing development outcomes’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eversole (2012, p. 31)</td>
<td>‘Real influence that participants get to have over decisions made’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International Association for Public Participation (2006, p. 2)</td>
<td>‘Any process that involves the public in problem solving or decision making and uses public input to make decisions’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NSW Government (2012)</td>
<td>‘…is the process of engaging the community (including industry, businesses, residents, interest groups and organisations) in … planning matters.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parry, Moyser et al (1992, p. 228)</td>
<td>‘Taking part in processes of formulation, passage and implementation of public policies’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The United Nations (2005)</td>
<td>‘a two way process by which the aspirations, concerns, needs and values of citizens and communities are incorporated at all levels and in all sectors in policy development, planning, decision-making, service delivery and assessment; and by which governments and other business and civil society organisations involve citizens, clients, communities and other stakeholders in these processes’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martin and Eversole (2005, p. 8)</td>
<td>‘a generic term that can reflect many different levels and intensities of involvement by stakeholders, often specifically in relation to one particular institution’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Herriman (2011, p. 3)</td>
<td>‘an umbrella phrase [used] by the sector to include information, consultation, engagement and empowering activities’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wollongong City Council (2013, p. 2)</td>
<td>‘is about asking the community to help Council make better decisions’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NSW Government (2012, p. 39)</td>
<td>‘a more comprehensive approach… where actively working with the community to ensure its concerns and ideas are reflected… the community is involved in the ongoing delivery and monitoring… ’. (Refers to IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

‘Consultation’, ‘public participation’, and ‘community engagement’ are used to describe interactions between government and the community when a government
decision is required. Consultation is a means for allowing the community to provide input into decisions. The consultation process provides no suggestion the community has the power to make decisions, however, are provided passage to have a voice. Differently, public participation and community engagement suggest participants have a degree of influence on government decisions. They imply an increased capacity for participant empowerment.

It is possible that the difference between public participation and community engagement is semantic. Both refer to a planned process with the purpose of working with identified groups of people to address issues which may affect them. Upon considering the definitions provided in Table 2-1, community engagement is an overarching term which encompasses the levels of involvement and the influence of community in a decision making process. Community engagement is used in legislation and current government policy relevant to the research (Wollongong City Council, 2012b, Wollongong City Council, 2013, Parliamentary Counsel's Office, 2009, Parliamentary Counsel’s Office, 2013). For these reasons, ‘community engagement’ is used throughout this study whenever describing the process by which those in power provide community stakeholders with an opportunity to influence decision making. The community engagement process is undertaken between two parties, the governing body and those community stakeholders (community members) being invited to participate. The term ‘community stakeholder’ is used to describe participants in the decision making process throughout this study.

The definition of ‘community’ in the context of community engagement presents the need to identify the diverse range of stakeholder groups involved. This includes residents, businesses, non-government organisations and those who travel to the area
for work. In this sense, the assignment of definition is problematic in terms of its capacity to exclude (Campbell and Marshall, 2000, p. 330). Burns et al. (1994) recognise ‘community is not a singular concept but in reality represents a mere umbrella under which shelters a multitude of varying, competing and often conflicting interests’. ‘Community’ is a broad term used to define groups of people, and may be a geographic location, a community of place or a community of similar interest such as industry or sporting club. Communities, however defined, possess agency, having the ability to act and be agents of change (Giddens, 1979).

Wollongong City Council provides a definition of community stakeholders in the context of community engagement, being ‘all people and groups interested in the future of Wollongong’ (Wollongong City Council, 2013, p. 2), and it is this definition that will be used in this research.

### 2.3 The context of community engagement

This section contextualises the development of community engagement in a government context. Social Contract Theory recognises the phenomenon of people moving from a free state of living to one that is governed (Rousseau, 1762). Notwithstanding various types of government such as communism, totalitarianism and monarchism, community engagement is positioned within the democratic system. To further explain community engagement, the notion of governmentality is discussed. Governmentality is the use of techniques by governments to validate their power (Foucault, 1978 [2001]) and provides an explanation of how community engagement has come to be within democratic societies. The constructs explored are depicted in Figure 2-1. Community engagement resides within governmentality theory as a means of attaining validation and power. As a form of government,
democracy provides the platform for people to have input into how society is governed and recognises the agreement to move from a state of free will to one of governance, a phenomenon explained by Social Contract Theory.

Figure 2-1: The context of community engagement within government

Social Contract Theory is based on the premise people relinquish a free and natural way of living in preference to civilisation which is organised and governed (Rousseau, 1762). Rousseau suggests people act on three levels, as an individual, as part of a group and as a member of society. His notion of the social contract provides understanding of how social order is achieved when individuals are engaged as part of society. Consequently, people have an agreement with government, the ‘social contract’, which identifies the roles and responsibilities of the governed and the government.

Philosophers have reflected on the roles of government and the people within the context of the social contract. Rousseau suggests people enter into an agreement with
each other which results in the development of an institution that governs. He proposes that ‘since no man has a natural authority over his fellow, and force creates no right, we must conclude that conventions form the basis of all legitimate authority among men’ (p. 4). He explains that while people surrender their freedom to the government, it is the responsibility of the government to make decisions in the interests of the public.

‘Every service a citizen can render the State he ought to render as soon as the Sovereign demands it; but the Sovereign, for its part, cannot impose upon its subjects any fetters that are useless to the community, nor can it even wish to do so; for no more by the law of reason than by the law of nature can anything occur without a cause’ (p. 18).

According to Rousseau, people ‘are obliged to obey only legitimate powers’ (p. 6), the implication being ‘the people’ have the ability to determine who governs them. For a body to have the authority to rule, they must be validated by those being governed. The theory provides an understanding as to how society has come to be governed. One form of government, that is, democracy, is now discussed.

Democracy comes from the Greek words ‘demos’ meaning people and ‘kratos’ meaning rule and can be traced to Athens at the end of the 6th century BC (Jones, 1986). It emerged in the context of urbanisation, during a period of growing economic prosperity, and the desire by people to participate in governance decisions (Morris, 2004, Ober, 2010). Since its inception forms of democratic government continue to exist. In 1863, Abraham Lincoln proclaimed democracy as ‘government of the people, by the people, for the people’ (1863). Modern democracy differs from early democracy. Initially, democracy did not have political parties to elect, it was more direct with decisions made by majority vote. Today, albeit in different forms, democracy is the foundation of government in countries including England, United
States and Australia. Its application is relevant to each level of government: federal, state and local. Democratic governments are a representative system in which all eligible citizens have an equal say regarding who is elected, it is a system of rule by law, not by individuals. The rule of law protects the rights of community members, maintains order, and limits the power of government. In a representative democratic society, a key role of individuals is to participate in public life, choose leaders and decide who will represent them (Ng and Yap, 2004). Democracy clarifies how a government comes into power, further, governmentality explains how those in power function.

The concept of governmentality captures the ‘mentality of government’. For example ‘how different regimes of truth are related to political procedures and government techniques of various kinds’ (Dahlstedt, 2009). Governmentality was termed by Roland Barthes in 1957 to link processes of government with efficiency (McKinlay et al., 2012). The concept was further developed by Foucault (1978 [2001]), proposing the concern of government is the wellbeing of the population. Its purpose is to secure the ‘welfare of the population, the improvement of its condition, the increase of its wealth, longevity, health’ (p. 216). For Foucault, governmentality tactics are indirect and while targets may be determined, effective implementation requires the agreeable, active participation of the community being governed.

Community engagement is the process by which governments invite active participation of community members. Foucault argues regardless of the aims of politics, the means used to achieve them are broadly similar. ‘The authority of decision-makers is dependent upon how effectively they develop and deploy governmentalist systems’ (McKinlay et al., 2010, p. 102). Community engagement is
one technique within the governmentalist system which may contribute to the authority of decisions makers. It is therefore suggested that the effectiveness of community engagement process may relate to the success of government.

Theory development and pragmatic research in governmentality has been undertaken (McKinlay et al., 2012, Summerville et al., 2008). The results show community involvement in political decision making is carried out with an implicit agenda. According to Rose, to study government is not to start from ‘the apparently obvious historical or sociological questions: what happened and why. It is to start by asking what authorities of various sorts wanted to happen, in relation to problems defined how, in pursuit of what objectives, through what strategies and techniques’ (1999, p. 20). Barnett (2002, p. 310) describes public participation, or community engagement, as a ‘technology of government’ used to implement power and control. Building on this McKinlay, Carter et al. (2010, p. 121) suggest ‘governmentality is the moment, always unstable, at which the strategies of the powerful and the powerless meet, the ways in which individuals are targeted by disciplines and the ways that these techniques are accommodated, ridiculed or resisted’. Governmentality allows us to make sense of the contradiction of coinciding empowerment and influence (Hodgson, 2001, p. 314). Applying a governmentality perspective to different levels of government provides a platform to understand community engagement.

In summary, an introduction to the context of community engagement having regard to Social Contract Theory (Rousseau, 1762), democracy and governmentality (Foucault, 1978 [2001]) has been explored. As Figure 2-1 depicts, community engagement resides within governmentality as a tool of government. Democracy
allows members of the community to influence government. The next section considers community engagement within a local government context.

2.4 Local government and community engagement

Voting is a key element of modern democracy and something which, according to Wilson, voters are becoming more apathetic towards. ‘Representative democracy, the argument goes, needs to be supplemented by participatory democracy’ (Wilson, 1999, p. 246). Evidence suggests there is a rising demand in the community for increased involvement in decision making and accountability by governments (Barbaro, 2006, Herriman, 2011). Therefore, in addition to conducting elections many current forms of democratic government provide the community with regular opportunities during the term of government to participate in decision making. However, until the 1960s, decisions were primarily made by those in positions of power. People had the opportunity to vote to determine which person or political party would have the power to make decisions, however, voters had no direct input into decisions being made. Governments providing opportunities for community involvement in decision making became more prominent during the 1960’s in London with the release of the Skeffington Report (Wilson, 1999). This report examined involvement of the public in town planning (Town Planning Institute, 1968). It emphasised the need for planners, employed by local governments, to encourage participation in the process of decision making which affected the built environment of towns. Public consultation was discussed in detail throughout the report and stimulated discussion within local government and the community about community participation (Damer and Hague, 1971). The report describes the positive outcomes of the ‘establishment of community development projects and the
increased mobilisation of tenants groups’ (Town Planning Institute, 1968). As a result, local governments introduced new techniques to involve community members in decision making including ‘market research, consumer feedback and consultation’ (Wilson, 1999, p. 247). Accordingly, the role of government has continued to shift from ‘governing’ to that of ‘governance’, whereby government work with the community to deliver decisions (Newman et al., 2004, Lane, 2005).

Excluding the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), all states and territories in Australia have Acts which prescribe the role of local government in making decisions, providing services and representing the interests of their communities. The Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government suggests that ‘engagement is at the heart of what Council is designed to do’ (Herriman, 2011, p. 62). Each of the Acts describe the ‘need for local government to engage within the community and to encourage and assist participation’ (Herriman, 2011, p. 62).

While community engagement has relevance and application to levels of democratic government in many countries, this research focuses on local government in New South Wales (NSW) Australia. The NSW Local Government Act (1993) stipulates the range of responsibilities of local government within NSW and recognises the role of community members (Parliamentary Counsel’s Office, 1993, s.9, ss.4). Additionally, the state government has introduced the Local Government Amendment (Planning and Reporting) Act (2009) (Parliamentary Counsel's Office, 2009) and the Planning Administration Bill (2013) (Parliamentary Counsel’s Office, 2013), both concerning community engagement in the context of local government.
The Local Government Amendment (Planning and Reporting) Act (2009) relates to strategic planning and requires local governments to develop and implement a Community Strategic Plan. The Act stipulates that the Community Strategic Plan must be developed through the delivery of a community engagement strategy. The Community Strategic Plan for each local government must contain the vision and goals of the community gathered through the methods and activities outlined in the engagement strategy. The process promotes social justice principles and allow stakeholders to have a say in the direction of their local government area (Parliamentary Counsel’s Office, 2009, s.2, ss.13).

The Planning Administration Bill (2013) relates to planning decisions. The Bill makes it a requirement of Council to establish and implement a community participation charter, community participation plans and community participation guidelines. These documents define how, when and what planning decisions the community will be included in. While Councils customise these documents for their own area there are key principles which must be adhered to such as communities being offered direct input into decisions, are involved earlier in the decision making process and are consulted on a wider range of issues. The aim of the Bill is to ensure the community’s participation in planning is inclusive, transparent and accessible (Parliamentary Counsel’s Office, 2013).

While it is a legislative requirement that local governments undertake community engagement, the methods, practices and governing documents are determined by each Council. As a result, ‘the ways in which Councils engage with their communities vary considerably’ (Herriman, 2011, p. 10). To aid the implementation
of community engagement, Councils are guided by frameworks. These frameworks are now discussed.

2.5 Theoretical frameworks of community engagement

Community engagement frameworks are used to explain the levels of participant involvement, influence and power. These frameworks are presented as ladders, continuums or spectrums contributing to greater understanding of community engagement and consistency in implementation and policy development. They are tools for eliciting greater structure in the community engagement process (Bracht and Tsouros, 1990).

2.5.1 Ladder frameworks

Community Engagement frameworks presented as a ladder include Arnstein’s Ladder of Citizen Participation, The Public Participation Ladder, A Ladder of Participation, Ladder of Citizen Empowerment, and a Ladder of Empowerment. These frameworks are now discussed.

Arnstein’s Ladder of Citizen Participation

Arnstein (1969) argues ‘participation is the cornerstone to democracy’ (p.6) and, in the context of land-use planning decision making, developed a model to explain levels of participation (Figure 2-2). Arnstein explores community participation in terms of the distribution of citizen power, describing the ladder as ‘the redistribution of power that enables the ‘have-nots’ citizens, presently excluded from the political and economic processes to be deliberately included’ (Arnstein, 1969, p. 220). Arnstein’s framework remains at the core of many approaches to community engagement. The ladder’s lasting application may be attributed to its ability to
demonstrate the role of power relations which exist during community participation with organisations.

![Figure 2-2: Ladder of Citizen Participation](Arnstein, 1969)

The ladder’s steps represent a progression of citizen participation ranging from non-participation to full participation. The lower rungs describe how holders of power ‘educate’ community stakeholders. At this level, community stakeholders have no power or influence. The middle rungs represent activities including notification and consultation. Such activities give the impression of power, but no real power is given to citizens. It is only when community stakeholders are involved in equal partnerships with decision makers that power is delegated and influential. Table 2-2 provides an overview of Arnstein’s (1969) framework:
Titter and McCallum (2006) critique Arnstein’s Ladder of Participation suggesting it is insufficient to describe participation as a linear progression ranging from non-participation to citizen control. The ladder does not account for the volatility and changing nature of community participation and should be aligned to the board game ‘Snakes and Ladders’. The introduction of this metaphor encompasses the diversity of community engagement and the way in which community stakeholders navigate through the processes. The ladder does not reflect the complex nature of communities or decisions. While focussing on the outcome, there is no consideration for processes, methods or levels of expertise. Arnstein does not account for the fact that for some community stakeholders participating in itself may be the vital

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Manipulation</td>
<td>This rung is non-participatory and aims only to cure or educate community stakeholders. Community stakeholders have no power or influence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Therapy</td>
<td>Similar to manipulation, this rung is non-participatory and aims only to cure or educate community stakeholders. Community stakeholders have no power or influence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Informing</td>
<td>The one-way flow of information, where those in power provide information to the community stakeholders. Community stakeholders have no power or influence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Consultation</td>
<td>Begins to include community stakeholders in the process and guarantee that their input will be incorporated into the decision making process. This stage provides the impression of power but no real power is given to community stakeholders.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Placation</td>
<td>Provides opportunity for chosen representative to participate, again with no guarantee that their input will be incorporated into the decision. This stage provides the impression of power but no real power is given to community stakeholders.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Partnership</td>
<td>Community stakeholders work with those in the position of power and are given some level of power and included in decision making.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Delegation</td>
<td>Community stakeholders are delegated power and have the dominant power</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Citizen control</td>
<td>Community stakeholders have the entire power in decision making including management and policy control.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
objective. Rather, to her, the measure of participation lies solely with the level of power community stakeholders have to influence decision making.

Frameworks which built upon Arnstein’s Ladder of Citizen Participation include, The Public Participation Ladder, Ladder of Empowerment, Ladder of Citizen Empowerment and Ladder of Participation. These are now explained.

The Public Participation Ladder

Wiedemann and Femers (1993) use the ladder formation to illustrate public participation within government obligations. The Public Participation Ladder (Figure 2-3) has a focus on active public participation. The lowest level of the ladder depicts the public’s right to know, while the highest level is active participation in final decision making.

A Ladder of Participation

Wilcox (1999) developed a framework comprising interrelated levels of community participation. The ‘Ladder of Participation’ (Figure 2-4) suggests participation occurs
in various situations and for different reasons. It acknowledges that while power is not always transferred in participation activities, the process is still important and mutually beneficial. While Arnstein’s ladder denotes citizen control as the ultimate outcome, the Ladder of Participation suggests it is acceptable for the transfer of power to vary based on circumstances, and that the transfer of complete power is not always the desired outcome, nor does it necessarily demonstrate effective participation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Consultation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deciding together</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acting together</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supporting individual community initiatives</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 2-4: A Ladder of Participation**
(Wilcox, 1999)

**Ladder of Citizen Empowerment**

There has been a move towards understanding participation in terms of the empowerment of individuals and communities. Burns et al. (1994) modified Arnstein’s Ladder of Citizen Participation to propose the Ladder of Citizen Empowerment (Figure 2-5). This was developed on the idea of community stakeholders as consumers and the resulting power individuals possess. This framework is based on the notion that community stakeholders should be active in all aspects of decision making that affects them, including those made by governments. The ladder presents more rungs than others described and in doing so provides additional detail. Differences in citizen control are identified as ‘independent’ and ‘entrusted’ and between ‘cynical’ and ‘genuine’ consultation. ‘Civic hype’ is
included at the lowest rung on the ladder indicating that community participation can be purely a process to sell a decision to the community.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CITIZEN CONTROL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12. Independent control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Entrusted control</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CITIZEN PARTICIPATION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10. Delegated control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Partnership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Limited decentralised decision-making</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Effective advisory boards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Genuine consultation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. High quality information</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CITIZEN NON-PARTICIPATION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4. Customer care</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Poor information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Cynical consultation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Civic hype</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 2-5: A Ladder of Citizen Empowerment**  
(Burns et al., 1994)

**A Ladder of Empowerment**

The Ladder of Empowerment (Rocha, 1997) (Figure 2-6) identifies types of empowerment similar to Arnstein and Burns et al. The five rungs move from levels of individual involvement to community based empowerment. The first two rungs are focussed on individual empowerment, the third rung is applicable to both individual and community empowerment, with the final two rungs focussing on community empowerment as the ultimate goal. Rocha highlights that one rug is not more beneficial nor important than another, rather they ‘are arranged on the ladder
based on the intended locus of their outcomes, from individual to community empowerment’ (1997, p. 35). The framework was developed in the context of service delivery and empowerment is based on services and knowledge being provided by the service provider and consumed by the individual or community. The ladder differs from Arnstein’s in that it focusses on empowerment and the potential of empowerment rather than distribution of power.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community Involvement</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rung 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rung 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rung 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rung 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rung 1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Individual empowerment**

**Figure 2-6: A Ladder of Empowerment**
(Rocha, 1997)

2.5.2 Continuum frameworks

**Public Participation Continuum**

An alternative approach to the ladder conceptualisations was proposed by Cogan and Sharpe (1986), who proposed the Public Participation Continuum. The continuum postulates a ‘successful public involvement program incorporates several techniques’ (Cogan and Sharpe, 1986, p. 292) and these techniques can be graphically presented as a continuum ranging from passive involvement to active involvement (Figure 2-7).
Table 2-3 provides a description of each stage of the Public Participation Continuum.

**Table 2-3: Overview of Public Participation Continuum**
(Cogan and Sharpe, 1986)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Publicity</td>
<td>Publicity techniques are designed to persuade and facilitate public support, relating to community stakeholders as passive consumers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Education</td>
<td>Public education programs present relatively complete and balanced information so that community stakeholders may draw their own conclusions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Input</td>
<td>Public input techniques solicit ideas and opinions from community stakeholders. They are most effective when combined with feedback mechanisms which inform community stakeholders of the extent to which their input has influenced ultimate decisions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Interaction</td>
<td>Public interaction techniques facilitate the exchange of information and ideas among community stakeholders, planners, and decision makers. When these techniques are effectively utilized, each participant has the opportunity to express his or her views, respond to the ideas of others, and work toward consensus.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Partnership</td>
<td>Public partnerships offer community stakeholders a formalised role in shaping the ultimate decisions.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A key proposition of the continuum is that the number of community stakeholders who can be involved is inversely related to the level of active involvement. For example, the dissemination of information can potentially reach large populations while participation numbers are limited in public partnership activities (Cogan and Sharpe, 1986, p. 293). Although the continuum uses simple language, it broadens the community engagement vocabulary as it uses terms other than those commonly used in the other frameworks such as consultation, collaboration and empowerment. In
fact, the continuum provides no suggestion that ultimate decision making power can be held by the community. Reflecting on local government’s legislative requirements regarding decision making, the absence of empowerment makes it suitable to a local government context because it does not propose community stakeholders hold the power to make decisions.

**IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum**

Considering these frameworks, it is clear there are inconsistencies in the definition of community engagement and no focus on how community engagement is perceived by community stakeholders. The need for consistency in community engagement language and practice was identified by the International Association of Public Participation (IAP2) (International Association for Public Participation) and in response to this need IAP2 developed a continuum-style approach to define community engagement called the IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum (Figure 2-8).

The IAP2 Spectrum suggests different stages of engagement from ‘inform’ to ‘empower’. The five levels of the spectrum are shown in Figure 2-8. A different colour has been appointed to each level of the Spectrum, this is not a feature of the framework rather a tool to allow visual connection to each aspect of the Spectrum as it is discussed throughout the following chapters.
Moving from left to right, there is an increase in public participation and power. To further develop the consistency in community engagement language and delivery, the Spectrum is supplemented by the IAP2’s core values for the practice of public participation, IAP2’s code of ethics for the public participation practitioner and the tools and techniques for undertaking engagement activities for each level of the spectrum (International Association of Public Participation, 2014). The IAP2 Spectrum and supporting resources are well known among practitioners and provide a common ‘supply-side’ language throughout the field (Herriman, 2011).

A critic of the IAP2 Spectrum, Larry Susskind, Professor of Urban and Environmental Planning, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, claims the spectrum is not useful in either a practical or theoretical sense (Carson, 2008). Susskind, in conversation with IAP2 members believes ‘inform’, the first step of the spectrum, is not a form of participation but rather a completely passive role. He also maintains

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Public participation goal</th>
<th>Inform</th>
<th>Consult</th>
<th>Involve</th>
<th>Collaborate</th>
<th>Empower</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions</td>
<td>To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions</td>
<td>To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure the public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered</td>
<td>To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution</td>
<td>To place final decision making in the hands of the public</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 2-8: The IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum**
(International Association for Public Participation, 2004)
‘empower’, is unfeasible as elected representatives are not permitted to delegate their decision making authority due to legislation. Susskind suggests ‘involve’ and ‘consult’ are the same thing and that true collaboration includes consultation. Susskind (Carson, 2008, p. 68) claims:

‘In the end, there is really just collaboration – that is, an invitation to selected stakeholders to participate in joint decision-making, including the design of the process itself’.

Susskind suggests only collaborate exists and therefore every decision made must be undertaken in partnership between the organisation and the community. Contrary to Susskind’s claims, the literature provides evidence there is no one type of participation and the community can be involved in decision making in different capacities. While there is little evidence to support the claim ‘consult’ and ‘involve’ are not relevant, Susskind’s assertion regarding the need to remove ‘empower’ from the spectrum is often the case in practice. Empower is a complex concept in community engagement and is often presented as the highest level of community stakeholder power or control. As presented in this chapter, empower definitions suggest the community has ultimate decision making power to control issues and shape directions (Bracht and Tsouros, 1990). However, in the case of Wollongong City Council, the final ‘empower’ stage is not included in the Community Engagement Policy 2013, only the levels ‘inform’ through to ‘collaborate’. Despite the omission of ‘empower’, the organisation has chosen to utilise the spectrum for implementing community engagement. While the spectrum has critics, it does provide practitioners with a common language and is utilised widely by local governments in Australia. Compared to other frameworks, the IAP2 spectrum provides clearer aims and direction regarding the community engagement process.
Clarity regarding community engagement is essential to effective outcomes and building stronger relationships, which are fundamental to meaningful and effective community engagement (Kagan et al., 2005). Kagan et al. suggest too often the importance of relationship building is overlooked in the engagement process. He presents the benefits of building rapport and using early interactions as an opportunity to establish ongoing relationships with the community, in turn increasing the effectiveness and harnessing the associated benefit of community engagement. The relevance of shared meaning and building relationships within a community engagement context is now explored from a relationship marketing perspective.

2.6 Relevance and context of shared meaning

Local governments in New South Wales are legally required to involve the community in decision making however they are also often keen to implement community engagement activities because of the proven benefits, as discussed in Chapter One, to both Council and the community. In an attempt to develop the relationships central to community engagement initiatives, local governments are developing strategies for allocating resources, attracting attention and creating interest amongst community members. Generating community interest and participation in such initiatives is a marketing challenge, with local governments needing to communicate the engagement initiatives effectively, prompting individuals to become involved and maintaining their involvement. The latter has a relationship marketing perspective, the effectiveness of which relies on shared meaning, commitment and trust. Alignment of meaning is the foundation of successful relationships (Morgan and Hunt, 1994).
The constructs described above are depicted in Figure 2-9. Relationship marketing is a key concept within marketing theory as a means of establishing long-term relationships with stakeholders for mutual gain. Commitment-Trust Theory recognises trust and commitment as the key drivers of relationship marketing and within both of these lay the variable of shared values.

![Figure 2-9: The context of shared values within marketing](image)

2.6.1 Relationship marketing

Relationship marketing highlights that both the customer and organisation have active roles in interactions, each party benefits from mutual outcomes and is concerned with the progress and maintenance of equally satisfying long-term relationship (Sheth and Parvatiyar, 2000, Kotler, 1982, Buttle, 1996). Relationship marketing prescribes that it is ‘more effective to invest in long-term customer interactions than to rely on a series of potentially unrelated, one-time exchanges’ (Zinkhan, 2002, p. 83). Relationship marketing focuses on relationships rather than
the transaction, which is the fundamental difference to traditional or transactional marketing. Relationship marketing involves numerous exchanges over time while transactional exchanges involve a single, short term exchange with a distinct beginning and end. Relationship marketing relates to establishing and maintaining healthy relationships which are ‘characterised by concern, trust, commitment and service’ (Buttle, 1996). Various definitions of relationship marketing exist (Berry, 1983, Morgan and Hunt, 1994, Sheth and Parvatiyar, 1994). The definition by Gronroos (1994) on relationship marketing provides a detailed account. He explains relationship marketing is to:

‘identify and establish, maintain, and enhance, and when necessary, terminate relationships with customers and other stakeholders…so that the objectives of all parties involved are met. This is achieved by a mutual exchange and fulfilment of promises’ (p.4).

A common theme among these definitions is relationship marketing is principally a process. Notwithstanding, relationship marketing activities have been identified as particularly important in the not-for-profit sector (MacMillan et al., 2005, Sargeant and Ewing, 2001).

Benefits resulting from effective relationship marketing include increased marketing productivity, stability and security (Gummesson, 1997), increased transactions, reduced costs, free advertising through positive word of mouth (Zeithaml and Bitner, 1996), achieving greater efficiency in decision making, reducing the task of information processing and achieving more cognitive consistency in decisions (Sheth and Parvatiyar, 1995).

According to Bagozzi (1975, p. 273) the motivation for participating in a relational exchange is satisfying a goal. The relationship plays a crucial role in achieving the goal of securing a product or service, the latter being the case for local government.
Morgan and Hunt (1994) identify relationship benefits as a vital precursor for the kind of relationship commitment that typifies those who engage in relational exchange. In their Commitment-Trust Theory of relationship marketing, Morgan and Hunt (1994) typify individuals enter relationships based on trust and by doing this the associated risks are reduced because trust is associated with consistency, honesty, and capability. Further, Morgan and Hunt suggest individuals are driven to participate in relational exchanges with those that they share values with.

2.6.2 Commitment-Trust Theory

Commitment-Trust Theory identifies that two fundamental drivers must exist for a relationship to be successful: trust and commitment (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Trust is the confidence each party has that the other party will not do something harmful or precarious. Commitment involves a long-term desire to continually invest in order to maintain a valued partnership (Berry and Parasuraman, 1991). The Key Mediating Variable (KMV) Model (Figure 2-10) was developed to detail variables within the relational exchange (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). The model shows the factors which can potentially affect commitment and trust and arrows indicate the direction of the influence. The factors affecting commitment are relationship benefits, relationship termination costs, shared values and trust; while the factors affecting trust are shared values, communication and opportunistic behaviour. ‘Shared values’ is a precursor for both trust and commitment. There are a range of variables, creating a multifaceted web however the model provides awareness of the various areas that need to be considered when developing relationships.
Figure 2-10: The Key Mediating Variable (KMV) Model of relationship marketing
(Morgan and Hunt, 1994)

To further understand the key drivers of the Key Mediating Variable (KMV) Model, commitment and trust will now be explained. The principle of commitment in a general sense, that is, ‘being dedicated to a cause or activity’ (Oxford Dictionary, 2015), is directly reflected in that of relationship commitment. In the context of relationship marketing the ‘cause’ or ‘activity’ is the relationship between stakeholders. Morgan and Hunt describe relationship commitment

‘as an exchange partner believing that an ongoing relationship with another is so important as to warrant maximum efforts at maintaining it; that is, the committed party believes the relationship is worth working on to ensure that it endures indefinitely’ (1994, p. 23).

Commitment plays a crucial role to the success or failure of any relationship. Berry and Parasuraman suggest ‘relationships are built on mutual commitment’ (1991, p.
and the relationships are directly influenced, either positively or negatively, by the level of commitment exchange partners have for the relationship. Commitment is central in relationship marketing theory and an important outcome of trust in the Key Mediating Variable (KMV) Model (MacMillan et al., 2005).

The other key driver of the Key Mediating Variable (KMV) Model is trust. Trust is defined as ‘having the confidence that another party will not exploit one's vulnerabilities’ (Khan, 2014, p. 116). Trust is intangible, it is a personal belief system that rests upon the perceived reliability and integrity of someone or something. In the context of relationship marketing trust is an assumed belief by one person towards another individual or organisation that they can be relied on (Morgan and Hunt, 1994, Rotter, 1967). Trust exists when ‘one party has confidence in an exchange partner's reliability and integrity which are associated with such qualities as consistent, competent, honest, fair, responsible, helpful, and benevolent’ (Morgan and Hunt, 1994, p. 23). Trust is also the foundation for loyalty (Berry, 1983), it creates the feeling of security, diminishes doubt and creates a supportive situation, each of which are key elements for relationship success. Trust is developed from past experiences (MacMillan et al., 2005, Morgan and Hunt, 1994, Lamothe and Lamothe, 2012, Van Slyke, 2007). Individuals ‘interact, experience and observe the actions’ of the other person or organisation (MacMillan et al., 2005), process the experience and formulate their point of view on how they can expect that person or organisation to behave in future interactions. It is the ongoing exchanges which lead to accumulative understanding of how the other party will act (Lamothe and Lamothe, 2012).
Trust has been a topic of research in academic areas including psychology and marketing (Papadopoulou et al., 2010) with interest growing in the last 15 years within economics (Sapienza et al., 2013, p. 1). It is argued trust is central to relationships and has been linked to positive outcomes for organisations (MacMillan et al., 2005, p. 807). The development of trust is a significant feature in relationship marketing generally (Gummesson, 1997) including the not-for-profit sector (Thomas et al., 2002). Trust in the context of government has gained the interest of academics (Papadopoulou et al., 2010, p. 2), and while there is some disagreement regarding how trust is developed and maintained between individuals and organisations (Shockley-Zalabak et al., 2000), the construct of trust is considered an ‘important facet of local government’ (Rees and Gardner, 2003, p. 147). Rees and Gardner (2003) provide insight into the nature of trust within a local government context. Consideration is given to the intangibility of service and they suggest that establishing trust reduces ‘uncertainty and vulnerability’ (p. 148). It is for this reason they believe relationship marketing, and more specifically trust, can be useful for local government (Rees and Gardner, 2003). Building on this is the work of Van Slyke (2007) who suggests trust is the focal point for relationships between governments and community. By understanding each other’s motivations and limitations, trust begins to build and in turn so does commitment to the relationship (Van Slyke, 2007).

The Key Mediating Variable (KMV) Model describes commitment and trust as the two key drivers of relationships and therefore relationship marketing. Both key drivers have variables which directly affect the outcomes and of these variables,
‘shared values’ is the only variable which influences both trust and commitment demonstrating the importance of shared values.

2.6.3 Shared values

Shared values as a variable in the relationship structure has gained increased interest with researchers (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Shared values indicate both parties have comparable symbolic systems and explanatory logic which, in turn, means the goals and benefits of both parties can be compatible (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Shared values exist when there are ‘beliefs in common about what behaviors, goals, and policies are important or unimportant, appropriate or inappropriate, and right or wrong’ (Morgan and Hunt, 1994, p. 25). Morgan and Hunt’s research focussed on shared ethical values, however they indicate other types of shared values would also be directly applicable within the Key Mediating Variable (KMV) Model (Morgan and Hunt, 1994, p. 32). Shared values also refer to common beliefs or goals and for this reason it is proposed the beliefs, understanding or ‘meaning’ which is assigned to community engagement should also be shared in order to harness the range of benefits offered by both successful community engagement and positive relationship marketing.

Shared values are described as the foundation of trust (Dwyer et al., 1987, Morgan and Hunt, 1994). A direct result from an organisation and community stakeholders having shared values is increased trust and commitment, which, over the long term, is beneficial for both parties involved in the relational exchange (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Shared values are essentially constructed by perception (MacMillan et al., 2005, Li and Green, 2011, Thomas et al., 2002, Grönroos, 1997) which is developed over time as the relationship continues to grow (Grönroos, 1997, p. 413).
Participant’s perception can be influenced by a range of things including technologies and knowledge (Grönroos, 1997, p. 416) however, Thomas et al. (2002) propose that particular focus should be made on ensuring the values of the organisation are known by community stakeholders.

Local governments are tasked with the responsibility of engaging the community in decision making processes. It has been demonstrated the most mutually beneficial means of undertaking community engagement is achieved by building relationships between an organisation and community stakeholders, a process understood through relationship marketing.

In summary, the community engagement literature consists of a diverse range of terminology and theoretical frameworks to explain the process by which those in power provide the community an opportunity to influence decision making. Notwithstanding the array of terminology and frameworks, this thesis argues a relationship marketing approach between Council and its community will assist community engagement effectiveness. Central to this approach is commitment and trust based upon shared meanings. IAP2 have attempted to address this issue by developing the IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum. The Spectrum is utilised by community engagement professionals and provides a common language and guiding principles. However, it fails to provide insight into the meaning of community engagement from a community stakeholder’s perspective. This research addresses this shortcoming. By understanding meanings of community engagement and the alignment with the intended meaning, governments will be better equipped to design appropriate community engagement policies and implement effective delivery of community engagement opportunities.
2.7 Chapter summary

This chapter has explored the definitions and theoretical frameworks used in the field of community engagement. The relevance of community engagement to governments, in particular, local government was established. Importantly, the theoretical structure of the study was explained, which includes broad level marketing and within this relationship marketing. Underlying this is the level of commitment and trust between all relationship stakeholders and at a finer level this requires shared values. By doing so, the importance of shared meaning in the context of effective community engagement was established.
Chapter Three - Method of Enquiry

This chapter details the method of enquiry used to undertake the study. Phenomenology is the guiding methodology, and details regarding sampling, recruitment, data collection, data analysis, integrity in qualitative research and ethical considerations are also explained and discussed. Figure 3-1 provides an overview of the method of enquiry.

**Figure 3-1: Overview of method of enquiry**

With the purpose of understanding the meaning community stakeholders assign to community engagement, a qualitative approach was implemented, guiding data collection and analysis. The methodology focuses on ‘how people make meaning out of their lived, everyday experiences’ (Duffy and Chenail, 2008, p. 30), conducted from an interpretivist paradigm. The epistemological foundation of interpretivism states one must experience a reality to understand it; it is through lived experiences that we know what we know (Gray, 2014). Interpretive research requires the researcher to use abstract thinking in the interpretation and maintain objectivity (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Using an interpretive paradigm, a phenomenological methodology was implemented.
3.1 Phenomenology

Phenomenology is a qualitative research methodology which questions how individuals make sense of the world (Connelly, 2010, Creswell, 2007, Moustakas, 1994). As the research objective for the study was to gain insight into personal understandings and relationships with community engagement, a phenomenological approach was appropriate. The methodology has a philosophical grounding and focuses on peoples’ experience and understanding regarding how they comprehend the world as they interact within it, seeking to explore the essence of lived experience (Moustakas, 1994). The methodology allows in-depth conversation that moves past the semantic and into the realm of lived experiences, uncovering elements that quantitative approaches are unable to achieve. By studying lived experiences, deeper insights into human nature can be gained. Phenomenology seeks to describe the phenomenon in question with as much depth of detail as possible, with the unique goal of describing the essences of the phenomenon that contributes to an understanding of meaning.

Phenomenology as a research approach explores what participants have in common regarding a particular topic or experience (Creswell, 2007). The fundamental objective of phenomenology is to discover a universal essence from individual’s experiences with a phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). The general process for achieving this requires a researcher to identify a phenomenon, collect data from individuals who have experienced the phenomenon and produce a detailed account of the essence experienced by the collective (Creswell, 2007) including ‘what’ the individuals experienced and ‘how’ they experienced it (Moustakas 1994).
The Encyclopaedia of Phenomenology (1997) identifies seven unique phenomenological perspectives. Table 3-1 provides an overview of each perspective.

### Table 3-1: Overview of phenomenological perspectives

(Embree, 2002)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phenomenological perspective</th>
<th>Focus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transcendental (descriptive)</td>
<td>How objects are constituted in pure consciousness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naturalistic constitutive</td>
<td>How consciousness constitutes things in the world of nature.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Existential</td>
<td>Concrete human existence such as free choice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generative historicist</td>
<td>How meaning is generated in historical context of collective human experience over time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genetic</td>
<td>The genesis of meaning of things within individual experience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hermeneutic (interpretive)</td>
<td>Interpretation of structures of experience and with how things are understood by people who live through these experiences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Realistic</td>
<td>The structures of consciousness and intentionality.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The most commonly used of these approaches are transcendental (descriptive) and hermeneutic (interpretive). The key distinctions between these approaches exist with ‘how the findings are generated and in how the findings are used to augment professional knowledge’ (Lopez and Willis, 2004, p. 727).

**3.2 Hermeneutic (interpretive) phenomenology**

Hermeneutic phenomenology is defined as the process of interpreting messages generally hidden in human experiences (Spiegelberg, 1975). Lopez and Willis (2004) states:

“in relation to the study of human experience, hermeneutics goes beyond mere description of core concepts and essences to look for meanings embedded in common life practices. These meanings are not always apparent to the participants but can be gleaned from the narratives produced by them” (p. 728).
Introduced by Heidegger (1889-1976), a fundamental difference to the phenomenological approach is the importance of context. Heidegger held context as pivotal to the situation, asserting people cannot exist without context, and it is these contexts that influence the individual’s experiences, understandings and choices throughout life. He introduced the term ‘dasein’ (Heidegger, 1962) to highlight being in the world not merely being. Heidegger contends humans are interpretive beings capable of finding significance and meaning in their own lives.

As a researcher embracing interpretive phenomenology, one must reflect on his or her past experiences, preconceptions, understanding and what was learned through the investigation. Interpretive phenomenologists believe suspending beliefs, knowledge and experiences is unachievable and such things are useful in phenomenological research (Geanellos, 2000). In this sense, bracketing is not incorporated into interpretive phenomenology. Heidegger suggests the researcher’s experiences, prior knowledge and interests are what led them to identify the need for research (Koch, 1995, LeVasseur, 2003). Therefore instead of bracketing, the research embraces their own experiences and understandings of the phenomena. A process of identifying and describing preconceived ideas about the phenomenon is undertaken by the researcher in order to make these explicit.

The goal of interpretative inquiry is to identify the participants’ meanings from the blend of the researcher’s understanding of the phenomenon, participant generated information and data obtained from other relevant sources as each introduce different experiences, expectations, thoughts and meanings to the interaction (Lopez and Willis, 2004, Van Manen, 1984). The essence is bridging the gap between the generally understood aspects of life and a deeper understanding of the unfamiliar to
‘unveil otherwise concealed meanings in the phenomenon’ (Spiegelberg, 1975, p. 75). Interpretive phenomenology is grounded in the belief the researcher and the participants come to the investigation with personal understanding shaped by their respective backgrounds and in the process of interaction and interpretation they co generate an understanding of the phenomenon being studied.

Undertaking a phenomenological study requires the researcher to follow procedural steps. For the purpose of this study the researcher followed the steps suggested by Creswell (2007). These are:

1. Determining if the phenomenological approach is appropriate or suits the research question;
2. Identifying a phenomenon;
3. Collecting data from people who have experienced the phenomena through interviews and other forms of data;
4. Undertaking data analysis by which significant statements are identifies which lead to developing clusters of meaning and ultimately themes;
5. Presentation of the essence of the phenomenon.

3.3 Study procedure

The study was undertaken in two phases, depicted in Figure 3-2. Phase One included an archival review and a semi-structured interview with the ‘governing body’ and Phase Two consisted of semi-structured interviews with community stakeholders. This section explains the population for the study, the sample method and size and the recruitment process. Further, the approach to data collection and handling is presented.
Figure 3-2: Overview of phases of data collection

3.3.1 Population

In order to develop an understanding of the meaning community stakeholders assign to community engagement and determine if shared meaning exists, the study population includes the ‘governing body’ and ‘community stakeholders’.

The governing body

Wollongong City Council was chosen as the ‘governing body’ due to its community engagement focus. The organisation has established a community engagement policy, a community engagement team and has been acknowledged internationally for community engagement practices. Additionally, the researcher is employed with the organisation providing access to data. Phase One of the study describes the research method for investigating the meaning the ‘governing body’ assigns to ‘community engagement’.

Community stakeholders

Community stakeholders in the community engagement process with Wollongong City Council are considered ‘all people and groups who are interested in the future of Wollongong’ (Wollongong City Council, 2013, p. 2). This definition provided the
selection criteria for participation in this study. Basing the selection criteria on the definition established by Wollongong City Council allowed the study population to reflect the context of a legitimate community engagement relationship. Phase Two of the study describes the research method for investigating the meaning ‘community stakeholders’ assign to ‘community engagement’.

3.3.2 Sample method

Purposeful sampling was used for data collection (Patton, 1990, Guba and Lincoln, 1994). This permits the researcher to select participants because they address specific requirements and they are likely to reveal in-depth information on a topic (Creswell, 2007). Purposeful selection is commonly used in phenomenological study (Klein et al., 2013, Ari, 2014, Gharibi and Gholizadeh, 2011, Kirbulut and Beeth, 2013).

Phase One required the participant to have a sound knowledge of the history of community engagement and Wollongong City Council. Also, the participant needed to have the knowledge and experience to clarify and confirm findings presented from the archival review. Participants in Phase Two were required to have an interest in the future of Wollongong and some form and relationship with Wollongong City Council, albeit passive or active. Purposeful sampling ensured participants in both phases addressed the specific requirements essential to the study.

3.3.3 Sample size

The number of participants in qualitative research is typically small compared to quantitative research (Morse and Field, 1995) and there is not one set of governing rules regarding sample size (Patton, 1990). Instead, the ‘sample size depends on what you want to know, the purpose of the inquiry, what’s at stake, what will be useful, what will have credibility, and what can be done with available time and resources’
(Patton, 1990, p. 184). In the field of phenomenology, the important point is not providing a representative sample but rather ‘to describe the meaning of the phenomenon with a small number of individuals who have experienced it’ (Creswell, 2007, p. 131). Experts suggest researchers should interview between 5 and 25 individuals who have experienced the phenomenon (Morse, 1994, Polkinghorne, 1989). Phase One sample size was limited to one participant as the purpose of the interview was to confirm or clarify findings from the archival review. It was determined the number of participants for Phase Two of this study would be ten, based on Groenwald’s (2005) suggestion of two to ten participants for a phenomenological study and Creswell (2007) who recommends up to 10 participants. The time and resources available to the researcher were also a consideration.

3.3.4 Recruitment

A range of potential participants were approached either by email or in person by the researcher. Individuals interested in participating in the study were invited to contact the researcher by email or phone. A Participation Information’s Sheet (Appendix C) was provided and arrangements for the interview made to individuals which met the recruitment criteria.

3.3.5 Approach to data collection and handling

Phase One - Archival review and semi-structured interview

The objective of Phase One was to provide insight into the meaning Wollongong City Council assigns to community engagement. Denscombe (2003) states that ‘documents can be treated as a source of data in their own right’ (p. 212). To understand the position of Wollongong City Council, an analysis of the community engagement policies (2008, 2010, 2013) and related documents was conducted.
While undertaking the analysis of the documents, the researcher looked for three categories of information, as suggested by Creswell (2007, p. 153), information expected to be found, information not expected to be found; and information which was unusual or conceptually interesting.

Following the archival review, an interview was held with a representative from Wollongong City Council to discuss community engagement from the perspective of the organisation. The objective was to establish the history of community engagement, discuss implementation of community engagement by Wollongong City Council and develop an understanding on how the organisation came to using the IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum.

**Phase Two - semi-structured interviews**

Ten individuals were recruited for in-depth interviews. A good cross section of gender, age and engagement experiences was achieved. The researcher contacted each participant to determine a mutually suitable date, time and location. Each interview was conducted at a public location including meeting rooms at Wollongong City Council administration building and community facilities. Before each interview the contents of the Participation Information Sheet (Appendix C) were discussed. Participants were requested to complete the Consent Form (Appendix D) and reminded they were free to discontinue the interview at any time. The researcher used an interview guide (Appendix E). These questions were asked of all participants, however, additional questions were subject to the responses provided. The interview length ranged between 15 and 55 minutes.

Each participant was advised their interview was to be digitally recorded. In attempt to increase the participant’s level of comfort and create a more natural conversational
environment, notes were not taken during the interview, although notes were made by the researcher immediately after each interview. Interviews were transcribed by the researcher within two days of the interview. Pseudonyms were attached to each transcript to ensure participant confidentiality. All data was stored in a secure location on a password protected computer.

At the completion of the data analysis, participants were contacted by the researcher to confirm the researcher’s interpretation reflected the participant’s intent. During this discussion, participants were provided the opportunity to modify or add to their original responses. Each of the participants were satisfied with the interpretation and no changes were requested.

3.4 Data analysis

‘Data analysis involves reducing accumulated data to a manageable size, developing summaries, and looking for patterns’ (Cooper and Schindler, 2006, p. 77). Various approaches to data analysis exist within the field of phenomenology, each are similar (Creswell, 2007, Diekelman et al., 1989, Moustakas, 1994, Polkinghorne, 1989). These steps include:

1. The researcher immersing themselves in the data and highlighting significant statements, sentences and quotes. Moustakas (1994) refers to this stage as ‘horizontalisation’;

2. Creating clusters of meaning from the significant statements and from these forging themes;

3. Writing a description of the participants experience based on the significant statements and themes;
4. Comparing and contrasting texts to identify and describe shared experiences, common meanings and patterns;

5. Presenting the ‘essence’ of the phenomenon as understood from the common experiences presented.

Undertaking this method of analysis seeks to establish a ‘composite description of meanings and essences of the experience, representing the whole group’ (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121). For this reason, the data analysis was guided by these five steps.

The analysis of participants’ lived experience commenced during the interview process. In order to enhance the connection with each participant and the data, the researcher chose to transcribe each interview rather than utilise a professional transcriber. Each transcript was read in entirety and during the second reading, the document was coded. An overview and evidence of the coding process is provided in Appendix H. Each transcript was checked by the researcher for accuracy, providing a third interaction with the interview recording. Completed transcripts were read to obtain an overall understanding of each participant’s thoughts and experiences and interpretive summaries completed for each. Each transcript was analysed in its entirety before analysis commenced on another transcript.

Saladana (2009) stated that there is no precise science related to coding, rather coding is interpretative. The researcher used the comment function in Microsoft Word to highlight significant statements and quotes. The researcher, consistent with Phase One, looked for three categories of information, being, what was expected to be found, not expected to be found and what was unusual or conceptually interesting
Themes emerged based on the experiences of the participants.

Once all transcripts had been analysed separately, the transcripts were analysed collectively to ascertain groups of identified themes. An example of the process is provided in Appendix H. After the themes were identified, narrative descriptions of the themes were written which explained the data in depth. These descriptions were developed in a way to reflect the essence of the meaning assigned by community stakeholders to community engagement.

### 3.5 Integrity in qualitative research

The study was designed using a qualitative paradigm as it provides the structure required to reach the research objective of providing insight into the meaning stakeholders assign to community engagement. According to Creswell (2007), a qualitative approach:

> ‘makes knowledge claims based primarily on constructivist perspectives (i.e. the multiple meanings of individual experiences, meanings socially and historically constructed, with an intent of developing a theory or pattern) …. It also uses strategies of inquiry such as narratives, phenomenologies, ethnographies…. The researcher collects open-ended, emerging data with the primary intent of developing themes from the data’ (p. 18).

Integrity in qualitative research shows that the interpretation of data is authentic, auditable, honest and sound (Watson and Girard, 2004). Validity and credibility are key elements of qualitative research and assist researchers to ensure the themes which emerged through research reflect the participants’ perspectives and experiences (Creswell, 2007, McCarthy and Halawi, 2010). The reliability of the data is essential to strengthen the credibility of the findings. Creswell (2007) recommends utilising at least one strategy to check the accuracy of research finding. The
researcher used four strategies to ensure research credibility: (1) review of transcripts, (2) peer review, (3) member checking and (4) clarification of researcher bias.

3.5.1 Review of transcripts
A review process was undertaken to ensure the transcripts were an accurate record of the interviews. The researcher reviewed each of the interviews digital recordings in its entirety against the corresponding transcripts. Small inconsistencies were identified such as spelling errors and incomplete words for example ‘an’ instead of ‘and’.

3.5.2 Peer review
Password protected interview transcripts and preliminary findings from the data analysis were provided to the researcher’s supervisors for review. A review of the documents was undertaken by the supervisors to assess the accuracy of the analysis. Each supervisor concurred that the preliminary findings were an accurate representation of the study data.

3.5.3 Member checking
Member checking, or member validation, is used in phenomenological study to achieve integrity in research. It involves the researcher presenting the interpretation of the data to the participants to clarify the accuracy and validate the interpretation. Lincoln and Guba (1985) consider member checking as ‘the most critical technique for establishing credibility’ (p. 314). During the analysis phase, the researcher coded the transcripts and themes emerged. To ensure the captured information and associated emergent themes were correct participants were asked to verify the interpretation. During the first interview participants were invited to nominate a
preferred communication mode for the second interview. The options of either in
person or via telephone were provided. The second interview delivered the
opportunity for the researcher to review the first interview and emergent themes with
the participants. Each participant was asked if the researcher’s interpretation captured
their lived experience accurately. Each participant was satisfied with the
interpretation they were presented.

3.5.4 Clarification of researcher role and bias
The personal biases and preconceived ideas on the study topics were recorded. By
understanding the researcher’s beliefs and bias, the ability to alleviate the risk that
they pose to the analysis process was reduced, increasing the credibility of the
findings.

3.6 Recognising the role of the researcher
The role of the researcher has relevance when undertaking research in an
interpretative qualitative context. The idea for research is often formed as a result of
a researcher’s thoughts and experiences, the researcher is responsible for adopting
the methodology, undertaking data collection and interpreting the data. The
researcher’s emersion in the research process dictates the necessity for the researcher
to investigate and recognise their own subjective reality (Cutler, 1993). By doing so,
the researcher has a clearer understanding of the influence their preconceived ideas
and beliefs may have during the application of the study and any subsequent
findings.

To address potential bias the researcher implemented a strategy which consisted of
reflecting on the researcher’s ideas, thoughts, beliefs and lived experiences in
relation to the research area at the beginning of the research process. Also, the
researcher maintained a journal throughout the data collection and analysis process, reflecting on thoughts and experiences. The reflection activities allowed the researcher to identify the influence these perspectives may have had on the data collection and analysis process. A compilation of excerpts from these reflection activities is provided in Appendix G.

3.7 Ethical considerations

Ethics approval was received for this study from the University of Wollongong Social Science Human Research Committee (H13/213). The study required participants to provide their time to participate and disclose personal thoughts and experiences. The wellbeing of participants was a priority for the researcher and steps were taken to ensure participants felt safe and no harm came to them through their involvement.

A Participant Information Sheet (Appendix C) and Consent Form (Appendix D) was made available to individuals who demonstrated an interest in participating. The documents provided specific details of the study including the objectives of the study, the types of questions and how the information would be used. The rights, benefits and risks of participants were detailed including confidentiality and the participant’s right to leave the study at any time.

The participant was reminded the interview would remain confidential, that they were free to leave at any time and that their involvement would not affect their relationship with Wollongong City Council. The researcher asked each participant if they had any questions. There were none. Upon receiving the participant’s verbal agreement to proceed with the interview, the Consent Form (Appendix D) was
signed and dated by the participant. The researcher then informed the participant that
the digital recording device was about to be turned on.

At the conclusion of the interview, the digital audio file was assigned a pseudonym
name and this identifier was used for the title name of the corresponding transcript.
The researcher was the sole transcriber further enhancing confidentiality. The
researcher was the only person who was aware of the participant’s names. The
signed consent forms and transcript files were stored in secure location and will be
destroyed after five years from the interview.

Consideration was given to the role and relationship of the researcher to the research
topic. The researcher is both an internal and external stakeholder. As a resident of the
Wollongong local government area the researcher is a community stakeholder. In
addition, the researcher is also employed by Wollongong City Council. The
researcher’s role with Wollongong City Council holds no authority over any
potential participants and not deemed a limitation of the project. The researcher took
a leave of absence from their substantive position for a period of two years during the
research project to reduce the low risk of ethical issues.

3.8 Chapter summary

This chapter has explored phenomenology and provided justification for the use of
the methodology to answer the research questions. A description of the methodology,
its history and philosophical position was provided. The study procedure was
presented which defined the population, sample method and size, recruitment
procedure and the approach to data collection and handling. A five stage approach to
data analysis was presented which included immersion in the data, creating clusters
of meaning, describing participants’ experiences, identifying shared experiences and
presenting the ‘essence’. The four strategies to ensure research credibility and in turn create integrity in the research were provided. These methods included the review of transcripts, peer review, member checking and clarification of researcher bias. The role of the researcher was explored and a compilation of excerpts from reflection activities was introduced. The chapter concluded with a discussion of the ethical considerations employed in the study.
Chapter Four – Presentation of Findings

Findings of the study are presented in two sections, reflecting the phases of the study. The first section presents results of the archival review and the semi-structured interview with the Wollongong City Council spokesperson as explored in Phase One of this study, addressing research question one: What meaning does local government assign to community engagement?. The second section presents findings from the semi-structured interviews with participants in Phase Two, addressing research question two: What meaning do community stakeholders assign to community engagement?

4.1 Presentation of findings from Phase One - Wollongong City Council

An archival review was undertaken to understand Wollongong City Council’s position on community engagement. Following the document analysis process a semi structured interview was conducted with a Wollongong City Council spokesperson to establish the history and discuss implementation of community engagement in the context of Wollongong City Council. The spokesperson has extensive experience in community engagement and has maintained an influential role in the development and implementation of Council’s Community Engagement Policy since 2008. The sentences in quotation marks are quotes from the Council spokesperson interviewed in Phase One.

Wollongong City Council formalised community engagement principles and processes in 2005 with the endorsement of the Community Engagement Policy (Wollongong City Council, 2005). The Policy was introduced by the Community Services Department as an outcome of national and international research by Council staff. The Policy introduced Council’s commitment to community engagement and
described activities to be implemented in an attempt to seek the input of community stakeholders into decisions made by Council.

The Policy was revised in 2010 and renamed the Community Consultation Policy (Wollongong City Council, 2010). The revised and renamed Policy coincided with the replacement of elected representatives with state government appointed administrators as the decisions making body. The name change was a directive of an individual administrator who preferred the term ‘consultation’ and determined that it would replace the term ‘engagement’.

The current Policy has since reverted to the title ‘Community Engagement Policy’ (Wollongong City Council, 2013). The decision to revert to ‘engagement’ was made due to the term being understood to be the industry standard and considered to be a ‘higher order umbrella term’, of which one element is consultation. The current Policy introduced the IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation to Wollongong City Council’s commitment to community engagement. The language in the Policy is not identical to the Spectrum but does follow the principles. The Spectrum was modified by Wollongong City Council and presented as Council’s commitment to community engagement. Other Councils have implemented this approach (Adelaide City Council, 2009, Parramatta City Council, 2014) however it is also not uncommon for Councils to adopt the Spectrum without change (Bayside City Council, 2011, Cairns Regional Council, 2014, Warringah Council, 2015, Shoalhaven City Council, n.d.).

While the changes to language were minor, a notable change to the adopted Spectrum is the exclusion of the final ‘empower’ level; a decision made by Council following extensive debate (W.C.C. Spokesperson, 2013). The adopted version of the Spectrum is referred to within the Policy as ‘Levels of Engagement’ (Wollongong
City Council, 2013) and depicts Council’s agreed levels of community engagement. This framework is shown as Figure 4-1 (note that the level ‘empower’ – indicated in orange in the IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum (Figure 2-8) is excluded).

![Table of Levels of Engagement](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goal</th>
<th>Inform</th>
<th>Consult</th>
<th>Involve</th>
<th>Collaborate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Clear communication from Council to the community to assist their understanding of decisions that have been made.</td>
<td>Council seeks feedback from the community on draft plans, services, projects or policies. The community has an opportunity to have their say before a final decision is made.</td>
<td>Council works with the community to understand issues and involves community members in designing possible solutions.</td>
<td>Council will offer opportunities for members of the community to work with us to understand issues and develop a range of solutions. We will work together to make a decision on a preferred solution.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 4-1: Levels of Engagement**  
(Wollongong City Council, 2013)

Despite the adopted Spectrum, the interview with the Council staff member revealed the meaning assigned to the term ‘community engagement’ can vary between Council staff members. Not all internal stakeholders agree about the terms used within the field of community engagement or the importance of using the term engagement over participation or consultation. It is considered merely semantics by some while others believe the ‘words used in community engagement can be interpreted in different ways’. Further, despite the concept of community engagement being endorsed within Wollongong City Council for more than a decade, there is still inconsistency within the organisation as to its meaning. Community engagement is considered by some as conducting activities, distribution
of letters or promotional activities. An objective of community engagement in involving the community in decision making is not apparent.

The need to address these inconsistencies both internally and externally are recognised by Wollongong City Council. An ‘education process’ had been undertaken in attempt to influence community stakeholders’ understanding of community engagement. The campaign focused on establishing understanding that an individual’s opinion is one of many and the feedback process is also one of many components that influence decisions. Further, Wollongong City Council has acknowledged the need to ‘be clear on the decision to be made, how the community influence that and what aspects of the decisions the community can influence’.

Wollongong City Council recognises community engagement can be challenging due to resourcing, participation and managing expectations. Significant resources are required to involve the community in decision making, particularly in relation to strategic planning. The resources required, which include both time and money, include staff time and the development and distribution of communication materials. The process can also require significant contribution from community members, and Council empathises with the commitment required and appreciates participation can be ‘cumbersome’. Participation often requires community stakeholders to read and familiarise themselves with larger corporate documents which are difficult to understand. Reaching the diverse range of community stakeholders also presents challenges, particularly specific community stakeholder groups that are ‘hard to reach’ such as young people, people with a disability and people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.
Council recognises catering for the diverse and sometimes conflicting opinions within the community is not realistic and therefore some participant’s preferences are not obviously reflected in decisions made. Individuals and groups can interpret this as a lack of meaningful engagement or that decisions are already made prior to the engagement process occurring. Additionally, individuals and groups often expect a greater level of influence over decisions than cannot be afforded by Council, which can negatively impact the relationship between Council and community members.

The Wollongong City Council policy provides guidance on how feedback is used. It states ‘Council considers all submissions received during an engagement or exhibition period’ and ‘an analysis of feedback will be undertaken and a report prepared’ (Wollongong City Council, 2013, p. 3). A summary of community feedback is then included in Council reports to ‘form an element of the decision making process’ (p. 3). The decision makers are also detailed in the Policy. The Policy states ‘as a Local Government Authority, decisions are made by the elected Council or by Council officers under delegated authority’ (Wollongong City Council, 2013, p. 3).

Decision making processes at Wollongong City Council are influenced by various sources of information, legislative requirements and budgetary constraints. The Policy states community feedback is one aspect considered. Others include ‘Council policies, resolutions and policy statements, financial impact, state and federal legislation, technical and professional assessment, industry best practice and quadruple bottom line’ (Wollongong City Council, 2013, p. 3). Additionally, it states different decisions will allow different levels of input from community stakeholders (Wollongong City Council, 2013, p. 2).
4.1.1 The meaning Wollongong City Council assigns to community engagement

Wollongong City Council defines community engagement as ‘the opportunity for community to influence decision making’ (Wollongong City Council, 2013, p. 4). Community engagement is considered to be a valuable process that provides benefits for Councils, participants and the community. The benefits associated with community engagement include accessing ‘local knowledge of the community, creating shared visions and commitment to solutions’ (Wollongong City Council, 2013, p. 2). Community engagement is also understood to ‘increase confidence and trust with the community’ (Wollongong City Council, 2013, p. 2).

4.1.2 Defining the levels of the Spectrum – Wollongong City Council

The meaning Wollongong City Council assigns to the levels of the IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum are now discussed.

Inform

Wollongong City Council defines ‘inform’ as ‘clear communication from Council to the community to assist their understanding of decisions that have been made’ (Wollongong City Council, 2013, p. 5). According to Council, ‘inform’ is a one way process, providing information to the community. The action occurs throughout decision making to notify the community of the process and outcomes.

Consult

‘Consult’ is defined as Council seeking ‘feedback from the community on draft plans, services, projects or policies’ (Wollongong City Council, 2013, p. 5). The stage offers the opportunity for community members ‘to have their say before a final decision is made’ (Wollongong City Council, 2013, p. 5). ‘Consult’ is demonstrated
as a two way process which provides the platform for individuals to contribute their thoughts, ideas and experiences for consideration by the decision makers.

**Involve**

‘Involve’ is working ‘with the community to understand issues and involve community members in designing possible solutions’ (Wollongong City Council, 2013, p. 5). ‘Involve’ provides a greater level of interaction and opportunity for influence in the decision making process by allowing individuals to contribute to options and develop a deeper understanding of the decisions including constraints and opportunities.

**Collaborate**

‘Collaborate’ involves Council providing ‘opportunities for members of the community to work with [Council] to understand issues and develop a range of solutions’ (Wollongong City Council, 2013, p. 5). Council state that ‘we will work together to make a decision on a preferred solution’ (Wollongong City Council, 2013, p. 5). Collaboration is a two way interaction in which the community becomes the decision maker in partnership with Council.

**Empower**

‘Empower’ is not included in the spectrum adopted by Wollongong City Council. The definition of ‘empower’ as provided in the IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum, would require ‘handing over the decision making and…Councillor’s…committing to adopting a decision made by a particular group of stakeholders, without question’ (Wollongong City Council, 2013, p. 5). The decision by Council to exclude ‘empower’ was based on ‘the view that ‘empower’ isn’t actually possible in local
government because elected representative have legislative requirements to make certain decisions’.

Diverse attitudes towards ‘empower’ exist within Council. The Wollongong City Council spokesperson presented that some staff, ‘empower’ is executed through an individual’s opportunity to vote in elections in order to delegate their decision making power to elected representatives. Further, other staff believe ‘empower’ could be applied to aspects of a decision. For example, decision making regarding the naming of a new building could be delegated to the community, but decisions regarding location, size and budget may not be. ‘There is a strong feeling [Council] can’t allow the community to make decisions entirely’, rather another option would be to provide ‘a supported process [where community stakeholders] are given all the facts, figures etc., they need to make a decision, they make it and Council adopts it’.

While governing documents have been developed and made available to Council staff, it is evident the delivery of community engagement is influenced by the meaning assigned by individuals to the process.

**4.2 Presentation of findings from Phase Two – community stakeholders**

Phase Two participants shared their personal experience of community engagement and local government. Eight themes were identified that reflect the experience of participants – these are now explained and discussed. Note that participants have been allocated a pseudonym to maintain confidentiality. The themes are:

1. The role of personal experience and interests in understanding Council decisions
2. Perceived personal impact as a motivator for participation
3. The value of community engagement for both Council and community
4. Challenges associated with the community engagement process

5. Perceived inconsistency between theory and practice

6. The perception of community engagement as a tool for manipulation

7. Lack of understanding regarding how participation influence decisions

8. The definition of community engagement

The meaning participants assigned to the terms ‘inform’, ‘consult’, ‘involve’, ‘collaborate’ and ‘empower’ within the context of community engagement are also presented.

4.2.1 Sample description

The collection of demographic data is not imperative in phenomenological research (Morse and Field, 1995, Patton, 1990), however basic information was collected in this study for the purposes of describing the sample. Table 4-1 presents information about the ten participants regarding their work life, education, gender, age and level of participation in democratic processes with Wollongong City Council. The level of participation in Council decision making has been classified in two categories, active and passive. Active participation reflects participants who have intentionally participated in one or more engagement activities with Wollongong City Council. Passive participation is used to describe participants whose involvement with Wollongong City Council is limited to making customer service enquiries and/or voting. All participants in this study lived or worked in the Wollongong local government area. The sample resulted in an even number of male and female participants. The age ranged from 29 to 62 years with the median age 36.5. The sample included diversity in employment status including home maker, casual, part-
time and full-time employment. Participant’s education level varied from trade certificate to PhD qualifications.

Table 4-1: Sample description

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Work life</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Participation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kerry</td>
<td>Part-time</td>
<td>Degree</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Active</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richard</td>
<td>Casual</td>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Active</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felicity</td>
<td>Full-time</td>
<td>Degree</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>Active</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Penny</td>
<td>Part-time</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Active</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eric</td>
<td>Part-time</td>
<td>Trade</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>Passive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>Part-time</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Active</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brad</td>
<td>Full-time</td>
<td>Trade</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Passive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terry</td>
<td>Full-time</td>
<td>Diploma</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Passive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Briana</td>
<td>Home maker</td>
<td>Diploma</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Passive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter</td>
<td>Full time</td>
<td>Degree</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>Passive</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.2.2 Emerging themes

(1) The role of personal experience and interests in understanding Council decisions

Understanding of the types of decisions made by Council varied significantly. All participants were aware that Council makes decisions that affect the community.

This understanding had developed through personal experiences and interests, with three distinct levels of understanding emerging: limited, general and extensive.

Those with limited knowledge were tentative in providing responses to questions and responses were short and non-descript.

‘Well, mainly just community, um, to do with, I suppose, Wollongong City Council is to do with, I suppose ensuring that the community runs smoothly, so that would have to include roads, um, utilities, all that sort of thing’ (Briana).
The next level demonstrated a general awareness of decisions and services provided by Wollongong City Council, and participants could provide examples and discuss the Council services and decisions they were aware of.

‘Bridges and the correct roads to get people in and out properly. They have dramas with waste management and tips fees, clean up days they also have to specify the best places for footpaths and playgrounds and who looks after keeping the beaches clean’ (Eric).

The third level demonstrated an extensive understanding of the decisions made by Council. Participants could provide detailed accounts and offer a diverse range of examples in relation to the decisions Council is responsible for.

‘The nature of local government is to provide services for their local communities. There are a plethora of decisions they have to make as a result. Councils are known for the whole roads, rates and rubbish order of business, so of course there are decisions pertaining to those, however, their role and responsibility run much deeper than these. Things regarding culture, music, surveillance, economics, planning, development, the list goes on. The scale of decisions often varies within these contexts also’ (Richard).

Participants’ understanding and discussion of decisions made by Wollongong City Council was in the context of personal experiences and interests. These experiences included home ownership, employment, elections, personal and professional relationships and involvement in recreational sporting clubs. Home ownership provided the opportunity for participants to interact with Wollongong City Council and be exposed to pertinent decision making processes including development applications, tree removal, kerbside collection, land acquisition and rates.

‘I haven’t had a great deal to do with local government except for maybe purchasing a house, and going through the bits you have to go through, I have had some tree issues at my house and had to interact with Council’ (Brad).

‘I pay my rates as a home owner and I’m aware of the Council clean ups that the Council provides to get rid of your crap, and I’ve recently built a house so I am aware of the development approvals that you need to go through Council to build a house, that’s about it’ (Eric).
‘I pay rates, that’s Council. Oh, and I recently built a house, so I had to deal with them a bit then too... I’ve had a bit to do with Wollongong since I moved to the area a while back, when they tried to change things on my street, ended up speaking at a Council meeting because of that’ (Felicity).

Not owning a home was also used to explain lack of awareness towards the decisions made by Wollongong City Council. Non-home owners suggested the lack of home ownership reduced their need to interact with Council.

‘I haven’t bought a house so I haven’t had to deal with them yet. I have no house so what else do I have to deal with’ (Terry).

‘Council takes care of roads, rubbish, rates, as a renter what does that mean, that means don’t forget to put out your recycling bin on Tuesday…… I would never have thought of a thing called the DA before…because I don’t own a house and I haven’t been looking to buy’ (Sarah).

The majority of participants explained their employment directly influenced their knowledge of decisions made by Council. This could have been an outcome of their role, the services their employer provides or as a result of Council’s taking legal action against a client.

‘We had a guy getting printing done at our place a while back and he was trying to hand out flyers to everyone, not wanting this major road to go passed the front of his property, the poor guy, I felt sorry for him, he had no voice, he was done for, Council was doing it and that was it’ (Brad).

‘My understanding of Australian local government has come purely from the role I’ve actually been in’ (Penny).

‘Well, now I have a much clearer idea, now that I am actually here [place of employment]’ (Sarah).

All interviewees had participated in the Council election process, by voting or additionally by being an election candidate. There was awareness that participants’ votes contributed to determining the elected representatives, and that it is those representatives who make decisions that affect them. Further, participants who were
candidates in local government elections were exposed to a range of Council services and associated decisions as a result.

‘It comes back to voting as well, you hear different people saying what their strategies are and what their ideas are for Council’ (Briana).

‘It was when I went to run for Council that [pause]. I did politics at uni, I am a bit knowledgeable and care about and interested in politics, in relation to running for it, and then I had the realisation that this is the other level of government’ (Sarah).

Affiliations with sporting clubs also provided a connection with Wollongong City Council and decisions regarding local sporting facilities.

‘The only Council related thing we take part in these days is my son plays soccer on Council soccer grounds, and occasionally they call the games off because it is too wet, that’s about it’ (Peter).

‘I play soccer on the weekends as I said, so I am aware when the soccer grounds get closed by Council because of a little drizzle, which is kind of annoying’ (Eric).

The people participants were surrounded with also influenced their understanding of decisions made by Council, with relevant contexts including social, academic, employment and family.

‘I’ve been in Wollongong a long time, most of my adult life, and I’ve been at Uni for most of that with both study and employment and really, it sounds kind of silly, but around community activist circles, so I guess had lots of encounters of Council from that perspective’ (Sarah).

‘I don’t have much of a history with local government, except for what my wife brings home’ (Eric).

‘An active member…[activist group and community group]…. working in concert with Wollongong City…’ (Richard).

In terms of reasons for limited understanding of Council decisions, a lack of interest was discussed.

‘I’ll see what I want to see, so I’ll by pass it, if it was something I was passionate about I would’ve noticed it’ (Terry).
One participant explained her lack of knowledge regarding local government decision making in terms of her upbringing. Living on a rural property and being home schooled reduced her connection to local government and exposure to services provided by Council and decisions made.

‘Well, there’s not much to tell really, I was home schooled, so I grew up away, we spent nearly all of our time on the farm, I wasn’t in public schools where possibly a lot of information does go through schools, I’m not even sure, but I do find that I don’t really have very much interest in local government, I don’t know, it just sort of, it’s never been something that I’ve had much exposure, I haven’t had much to do with it’ (Briana).

Understanding of Council decision making is an evolving process. Participant understanding had continued to develop through different life phases. Some participants discussed how they expect to develop greater understanding in future life stages, for example home ownership, while others discussed how their knowledge had already developed through various prior experiences, for example participation in decision making activities.

‘Well, after that summit event I now realise they make decisions about a whole bunch of things’ (Felicity).

(2) Perceived personal impact as a motivator for participation

Participation with Wollongong City Council in decision making was motivated by a range of factors including a desire to be an elected representative, employment, involvement in activist groups or the potential impact on an individual’s quality of life. Further, some participants did not actively seek to take part because they could not see that it would provide any additional benefit to their lives.

The impetus for some to be actively engaged with Wollongong City Council was allegations of corruption within the organisation and their desire to improve internal
operations, in which case their participation resulted in them becoming an election candidate.

‘There was this real sense that this was a moment, this was a historical moment, there might actually be some potential for non-major parties to get a seat and for real community voices’ (Sarah).

‘I was a member of [group], a movement and elections campaign formed in response to corruption in Wollongong City Council. So I ran for Council’ (Richard).

Employment was presented as a reason for participating with Wollongong City Council in decisions making. In particular, the role participants held required their participation.

‘I have certainly participated in a professional capacity’ (Penny).

‘I am a researcher, consultant and public speaker on [topic/location] and its impacts on Wollongong local government’ (Richard).

‘Participating in various forums and focus groups that Wollongong City Council held representing [employer]’ (Kerry).

In some cases employment was also a motive for non-participation, due to a perceived conflict of interest because of the role they held professionally. Attendance at engagement activities was felt to be inappropriate by some participants because of the possibility that the community may not see the distinction between personal and professional involvement.

‘I think that should I rock up to anything people would know I’m a [professional role] so there may be a bit of, I don’t know, maybe they would query what capacity I was there at, was I there just as a resident, was I there as a [professional role], was I there to find out information’ (Penny).

Further, it was suggested that written feedback which provided a record of personal details and thoughts may be accessible to colleagues.

‘I find it difficult, that kind of conflict, and my name appearing on a record of submissions… so maybe it’s a fear that the perception of me would change in a professional basis based on what I’m saying on a personal basis’ (Penny).
A motivator for active participation in decision making with Wollongong City Council was the desire to influence decisions which were thought to have a potentially negative impact on their own lives.

‘…may impact the rest of my life so I would like to be involved or know what is going on’ (Eric).

‘My mate also called me a NIMBY cause I put in a submission against the DA for the house next door’ (Felicity).

Involvement with Wollongong City Council was also sometimes born as a direct result of changes Council were planning to undertake which affected individuals’ quality of life.

‘If you look at me, I wouldn’t have had much to do with Council and making decisions if I hadn’t got involved because of the road thing’ (Felicity).

Interest in activist groups and topic areas has created avenues for participants to engage with Council.

‘I participated in things that are separate to Council, the coal seam gas stuff, environmental concerned’ (Penny).

‘I guess partly when you are in those circles that is the obvious thing to do. So you know I’ve been in the [group], and I’ve been around like socialists and greens people a lot, they are kind of campaigning and being political all the time’ (Sarah).

Most participants discussed reasons for participation while others spoke of reasons for non-participation. Participation was not thought to add value to their life and was not a priority, particularly for those who considered themselves time poor.

‘I can’t think of any reason why I would want to ring Council to be involved in any decision making…I guess I am too busy with other things that I don’t put that as a priority in my life. I seem to think that the Council should have everything under control’ (Eric).

‘None of it really affects me, ….I’ll see what I want to see, so I’ll bypass it, if it was something I was passionate about it I would’ve noticed it’ (Terry).
A degree of trust is held with those who are participating in decision making and satisfaction exists with the decisions being made. As a result, participants felt no need to participate. However it was acknowledged that this would change if the participant was no longer happy with the outcomes.

‘I’m happy enough with what is going on that I don’t feel like I need to be involved, because …everything is going the right way, if things were to take a change I suppose obviously I would get more involved and you would want more to do with having more of a say’ (Briana).

The choice to discontinue interacting with Council was discussed because, despite ongoing discussions, the situation had not improved.

‘We just got sick of chasing up the issue really, so left it there’ (Brad).

(3) The value of community engagement for both Council and community

Participants’ thoughts towards the value of community engagement are captured in the words of Kerry, who stated ‘community engagement is very beneficial, for all involved, Council, those who actively participate, and the community at large’.

According to participants, community engagement provides both tangible and intangible benefits to both the community and Wollongong City Council. It provides opportunities for the community to have input into decisions that affect their lives, allows the decision making process to be more informed and can build trust and respect. Community engagement is perceived to build community capacity and be financially beneficial. Examples of these are now presented.

Participants believed that local knowledge positively informs decision making processes and that community engagement allows a variety of perspectives to be considered, creating a comprehensively informed outcome. It was suggested that while technical experts have scientific tools to inform decisions, residents know and
experience situations firsthand which provides a valuable source of data. Further, participants discussed how community involvement in decision making provides additional perspectives, which is beneficial to informing the decision making process.

‘[The community] are the one who are going to know where the problems are…[Council staff] making decisions…they wouldn’t know. [Council staff] get a pie chart or they’d get a graph to summarise what the problem is, but it always glosses over’ (Terry).

‘They are using traffic model for things but they are not using really life examples and scenarios. Computer modelling, yes I know, can be incredibly useful but surely it can’t take all factors into account’ (Penny).

Community engagement is seen as an opportunity to build trust and develop respect. Participants believed that the community should be involved in larger decisions and this type of involvement has the potential to build trust between Council and the community. Additionally, participants discussed the positive impact community engagement provides in relation to respect. Similarly the belief was held that community engagement increased pride and sense of purpose within community members. Through involving the community, it was thought that decisions are more likely to reflect the community’s needs and desires.

‘When it comes to big things the people of community should be involved more, and then they will trust people more’ (Brad).

‘When people are involved in decisions and processes, they have ownership, pride and a sense of purpose’ (Kerry).

‘I think it is good to have the community involved because living day to day in the community you know what you want and what you need’ (Briana).

Views on the potential and actual impact community engagement has on cost savings were offered. Participants discussed instances where community engagement directly resulted in the cost of projects being reduced.
‘...the community making decisions on certain aspects of the project and then [Council] making massive savings in cost, I mean that is a big win, that is a major win’ (Penny).

A situation was presented in which a financial outlay could have been avoided had the community been involved in the decision making process. ‘Council could’ve saved [hundreds of thousands of dollars] if they had asked us the questions’ (Felicity). Further to financial project savings, community engagement was seen to enable more effective service delivery, ‘from a resource level it just makes what you are doing more effective’ (Sarah).

Community engagement was also identified as a platform for community capacity building. Community engagement is seen as a means of working with communities to build on their assets, abilities and interests while providing skills and knowledge.

Participant spoke about the personal effect of participating with Council for her.

‘I got involved because of the road thing. Now, I’m pretty active in the community, going to the forums all the time, keeping my neighbours and friends informed on things that are happening in the community, so not only have I learnt a bunch of stuff and been exposed to the way Council works I am also not sharing that with others. That seems pretty valuable to me’ (Felicity).

Another example suggested that engagement activities conducted over longer periods of time and which had a community development focus resulted in positive outcomes in terms of capacity building.

‘It’s really important, and there are definitely moments that [Council] do a really awesome job, [project name], took a long time, a lot of disappointments for those [participants], but also a lot of wins for those [participants], some of those less tangible outcomes like capacity building, I feel like that stuff happened in that project’ (Sarah).
All participants discussed the positive consequences of community engagement and agreed that the engagement process is valuable. It was suggested community engagement is valuable when done well.

‘If it was done right it had the potential to be very valuable. I guess sometimes it is done right, in those cases then yeah, it is valuable’ (Felicity).

‘I think there is heaps of value engaging people, designing, coming up with stuff, getting them to around a project or a space, to use it to support it and all of that can happen with community engagement if it is done well, it also means that you design stuff that has relevance, so I think it has heaps of relevance when it is done properly’ (Sarah).

(4) Challenges associated with the community engagement process

Each participant acknowledged that community engagement is challenging to implement because of a range of issues including lack of community awareness and participation, budget and resource constraints, perceived inconsistencies in delivery of community engagement and the inability to address a diverse range opinions within the community.

It was that suggested securing participants’ involvement in engagement activities is an initial barrier to the community engagement process. Participants discussed the general lack of participation by community members, with particular reference made to individuals not being compelled to fill in forms such as surveys and feedback forms. Large portions of the community were believed not to be engaged with Wollongong City Council.

‘There are whole chunks of the population that years go by and they have no interaction with Council, they are never going to fill in a form they won’t respond to an email, they don’t necessarily read the paper’ (Sarah).

Participants acknowledged a general lack of awareness within the community of opportunities for engagement, suggesting that ‘more public awareness would be
beneficial’ (Eric). Other participants blamed the lack of participation on Wollongong City Council failing to communicate effectively regarding opportunities engagement.

The significant resources required to undertake community engagement were acknowledged by participants, who recognised the costs associated with engagement both financially and in respect to time. It was suggested that ‘democracy is very time consuming’ (Sarah) and ‘takes time and resources and stuff like that’ (Peter). The timeframes in which projects need to be delivered and the impact on delivering effective community engagement were also discussed.

‘Local government have a set limit, a budget…need to make decisions and within that then it’s pretty tight because moneys got to get spent, it’s got to get done a certain way’ (Penny).

Perceived inconsistencies between community members voluntarily providing feedback through community engagement versus paid consultants providing similar services was discussed.

‘There was also a whole lot expected for nothing. In particular, the in depth work [name] undertook…was all for free…some things they will pay a consultant to do, but why would they spend money on that when they have community members donating their time’ (Richard).

Objectivity in decision making was raised and participants questioned the ability of decision makers to be objective, for example ‘I guess the whole problem is how objective can a person be’ (Penny). Further to this, consistency was recognised as a barrier to effective community engagement.

‘But if I think they do [community engagement] well, or consistently, then ah, no’ (Felicity).

Inconsistencies in the circumstances under which engagement is considered appropriate, the types of questions posed and the process of decision making were
raised. Further, inconsistency in the level of experience or influence participants had was discussed.

‘A first person, who is finally deciding to make these, make their voice known, probably doesn’t have the channels or direction of how to get that out, so is it going to work every time, probably not, but then there are probably people in there, politics or Council is what they concentrate on and they have ingrained themselves into the voices and potentially there voice is always going to be heard where others probably won’t be’ (Terry).

Participants acknowledged the divided opinions which can exist among community members towards a particular decision and the difficulties such divisions present for Council. Empathy with Wollongong City Council was demonstrated in relation to trying to achieve meeting everyone’s needs. Further to acknowledging the potential difference of opinions within the community, it was offered that no progress would be made if decisions required consensus.

‘Working with the community is hard, I mean, while I didn’t want a road next to my house, other people wanted to be able to get to their houses when it rains…Council have to sometimes be the meat in the sandwich, that would be hard’ (Felicity).

‘I can’t imagine it would be an easy task to make sure everyone’s needs are being met and everything runs smoothly’ (Briana).

‘I guess if you ask for too much feedback and points of view you never get anywhere, so sometimes you just need to make that decision’ (Peter).

‘Sometimes the community’s a hindrance….everyone’s got a different opinion, if everyone has a difference are things gonna get done?’ (Brad).

(5) Perceived inconsistency between theory and practice

A disconnect between theory and practice was argued by participants. It was suggested the theory of community engagement was positive, however the reality of practice was not reflected. ‘The policy reads well and has good intentions. Whether the policy is adhered across all levels of Councils is another issue’ (Kerry).

Participants suggested the governing community engagement documents were
written by someone who works within the confines of an office, disconnected from reality, ‘some pencil pushers come up with the idea’ (Brad). ‘These are a bunch of buzz words’ (Richard) or ‘jargon’ (Felicity) which does not reflect Councils implementation of community engagement. Participants discussed perceived discrepancies between community engagement practice and policy.

‘The basic principles underpinning what local government is chartered to do and what it actually does can be seen to be worlds apart’ (Richard).

‘I think the policy explains some of the things they say they will do, but it’s not necessarily gospel, or what I’d call an accurate description of what really goes on (Felicity).

‘I think what it says in the Policy and what it says in the definition is not being met at all’ (Sarah).

Participants suggested they understood what community engagement is, however, believed the delivery of community engagement differed from how it should be implemented because it was too heavily determined by staff opinion. Further, suggesting the policy does not indicate how input will affect decision making.

‘My experience is that Council has a policy but staff pick and choose when they use it, or how they use it. When the community do participate there is nothing that guides them to show how their input will be used, like, how much it will affect the decision making process’ (Felicity).

A disconnect existing between theory and practice was presented however an explanation was offered in terms of resourcing and risk aversion. A level of conviction was established regarding the apparent inconsistency in frequency of community engagement opportunities. While all participants suggested engagement opportunities were not frequent enough, the perception of frequency varied.

‘I see they don’t involve the public enough with their decision making, but that is just what I see, maybe they do’ (Eric).

‘I understand that its better idea to get that outer public view, to make the right decision, but if they do or not, I don’t think so’ (Terry).
‘I’m a bit torn here from a theoretical position to an actual on the ground democracy is very time consuming position’ (Sarah).

‘I think the Spectrum is an ideal form of community engagement, it’s the kind of stuff you’d love to see happening, but it doesn’t really, I’d say, a lot of the time’ (Penny).

(6) The perception of community engagement as a tool for manipulation

Some participants were skeptical about the community engagement process and the motivations of Wollongong City Council. Participants believed decisions were often made by Council prior to community engagement taking place. It was suggested the engagement process may have been implemented to create legitimacy, to meet funding requirements or to establish buy in from the community.

There was cynicism amongst participants stemming from the belief that community engagement occurs purely to satisfy regulations. The process was described as ‘tokenistic’, ‘a rubber stamp’, a ‘tick box’ and ‘lip service’, while Terry stated ‘I guarantee you it’s a [politically correct] sort of thing’. Community engagement was presented as an activity governments undertake because they are required to, rather than as a result of genuine desire for community input.

‘I think that’s what it comes down to a lot of the time, my main concern is when I see engagement bandied about its being done because it has to be done, because the regulations say [Council] have to do it’ (Penny).

Participants discussed their certainty that decisions were made by Council prior to the engagement process being undertaken. Based on experience, it was claimed governments practiced manipulation by leading communities to believe they had been involved in decision making processes when they had not.

‘I work in government so I know full well how that works. They think they are informing you and consulting you, they are really telling you…they’ve made their decision already’ (Peter).
The following example of Wollongong City Council making a decision prior to community engagement was given, which cites management requirements to implement projects as the reason for making decisions without community input. It was claimed that engagement activities had been undertaken after decisions were made by Wollongong City Council management in an attempt to address the funding requirements of a project.

‘One of the ongoing problems for community engagement at Wollongong City Council, there is a clear disconnect between genuine and appropriate community engagement on the one hand and the desires of city managers to roll out initiatives despite a lack of community input into planning and infrastructure… The decisions had already been made, the money was already in the bank, they just forgot one step, finding out if it was really what the community wanted or needed. Insert community engagement here.’ (Richard).

Others believed that decisions were not necessarily made prior to the engagement process, but that Council makes decisions despite the feedback generated through engagement activities.

‘But the consult, involve, collaborate, is just whatever and away Council go with the final decisions’ (Brad).

Community engagement was seen to be used by Wollongong City Council to ‘sell’ a decision to the community. An instance of Council purchasing a property to undertake a project prior to any community involvement was explained. Council staff undertook engagement activities after the purchase however she believed that ‘they were just trying to sell us their idea’ (Felicity). Further, participants believed that community engagement is a process designed to make the community ‘think’ Council are involving them in decision making.

‘That’s it, it’s all a ruse, all a ruse, we will make it look like we are engaging the community and whoever but and we’ll ask them the questions and get them to give feedback so they feel heard blah blah blah and then we will just do what we were going to do anyway’ (Peter).
Participants suggested the way in which community engagement activities occur enables community input to be moulded. Questions can be asked in ways that lead people to provide comments that support the predetermined ideas of decision makers.

‘The way that you design that determined the kind of feedback you get, right, and it is that feedback that doesn’t necessarily shape a decision around that issue, but it adds to it, so it kind of gives it further weight, I think, to what was already being talked about, of what was being thought about at the higher level’ (Sarah).

Legitimacy was presented as rationale for Wollongong City Council implementing community engagement processes, with the process thought to make Council more believable or trustworthy within the community. It was suggested community engagement was used by Council to appease community members who were unhappy.

‘It’s all well and good to have a framework, it helps make undertakings look legitimate. It does not demonstrate how internal decisions are made regarding what level of involvement or influence people can have’ (Richard).

‘I complain…then [Council will] keep me in the loop to keep me happy’ (Eric).

Attention was also given to the idea politicians use community engagement only to inform their political campaigns. It was suggested politicians listen to the thoughts presented by the community and use these to formulate their campaigns so voters will vote for them, not because they genuinely support those thoughts.

‘The only time what the public says matters is when someone in that position wants to make something of themselves so they use that to better their own career…I’m going to say it so I’m backing their cause so I can get in’. That is how I believe politics works and governments work on every level (Peter).

The competing agendas of Council was presented and suggested it resulted in decisions being made without community input.
‘Councillors are making political decisions, where as they are making political decisions you've got the General Manager and perhaps even the Lord Mayor, to a certain extent making organisational decisions as well, um, so you sometimes wonder whether the opinions of the community are really reflected in the decision making process. And that the experiences that I’ve found over the years, where it seems to me that there’s quite clearly a strength of feeling on a certain thing but it doesn’t matter because a decision is going to be made anyway’ (Penny).

(7) Lack of understanding regarding how participation influence decisions

The most prevalent theme to emerge in the study was the perceived lack of transparency or clarity in relation to how community members’ feedback is used by Council. Participants believed that decision making processes are unclear and do not provide guidance about what to expect. Participants were unsure who actually made decisions and what Wollongong City Council’s obligations were, if any, to use the community feedback obtained. Participants also questioned the overall level of influence community stakeholders had and whether different community stakeholder groups have different levels of influence in the decision making process. The process which determined who and how community stakeholders are engaged was also questioned.

The lack of clarity regarding how feedback is used was an overarching theme raised by participants. Participants indicated they had no access to information or guidelines which explained how feedback is used. It was suggested feedback would be compiled into a report however, there remained a lack of awareness of the level of influence feedback would have on the pending decision.

‘Wollongong City Council is not as transparent as they could be in some of the decisions that are made by Wollongong City Council staff and councillors’ (Kerry).

‘There seems to be a void regarding how community input is used, what influence it has, or should have’ (Richard).
‘It doesn’t say what you do with it. It just says you go out there and ask for
opinions and we are listening but it does actually say that we are processing
what we are listening to and actually you know transforming that into
actions’ (Peta).

‘I sent [feedback] in, but not really sure who that ends up with that. They said
a report gets written with the feedback, but where that report goes to, who
knows’ (Felicity).

Participants questioned if requirements exist which prescribe how feedback must be
incorporated into decisions. Generally speaking, participants did not believe that
Council was required to listen or incorporate their feedback into decisions.

‘I feel there is no impetus for them to do anything other than we were there,
we listened’ (Sarah).

‘Because it’s about getting those ideas but it’s not saying we are going to do
anything with them, there is zero kind of commitment there’ (Sarah).

‘Asking someone their opinion, do they need to use it, no evidence here’
(Richard).

No clarity existed regarding how decisions are made. Participants made reference to
their desire for greater understanding of how decisions are made and who is
responsible for making them. They were uncertain about how decisions were made
and the level of influence the community, and themselves, had in the process.
Questions were posed which considered different community stakeholders groups
and if their levels of influence varied.

‘What [Council] do with that information, that’s what really interests me and
what, how, again how does it influence, if we are talking specifically decision
making, does it influence decision making and if so how much?’ (Penny).

‘When they make these decisions I’m not sure that my thoughts are any more
important than the next person who has a say. We are all just bundled in
together. I am not even sure how much they take into account the stuff we
say’ (Felicity).

‘But what happens to that and the extent which that influences the final report
that made it to the meeting nobody knows, lots of its hidden, I don’t think that
its sinister, I just don’t think its clear either’ (Sarah).
‘Is [the feedback] just date stamped and filed? How much do they listen to and allow the decision to be influenced by the thoughts and ideas of community members? Effectively, what level of influence does the community have?’ (Richard).

(8) The definition of community engagement

When describing the meaning of community engagement, participants used terms such as ‘involving’, ‘the community’ in ‘decisions’. Participants spoke about the process comprising ‘conversation’, the opportunity to ‘have their say’ and being ‘asked’ for their ‘opinion’, ‘thoughts’ and ‘input’. Participants suggested the process included ‘talking’, being ‘listened to’, being ‘heard’ and having their ideas ‘taken on board’.

Participants passionately believed it was the community’s right to be involved in decisions making processes. Community engagement was understood to be ‘Council’s responsibility to the community to undertake community engagement’ (Richard). Participants spoke about community engagement as an ‘obligation’ (Eric) of Council and how individuals ‘should’ provide the community with an opportunity to be involved.

While participants agreed the community should have the opportunity to be involved in decision making, some suggested the level of participation or influence should be determined by the level of impact a decision will have on the individual or group. Those affected ‘should be involved every step of the way from the beginning of the process’ (Eric). It was also suggested when ‘a decision does not directly impact on people there is less need for community engagement’ (Eric) and during times ‘people aren’t impacted the expertise of Council is sufficient’ (Eric). Further, the people
‘who have to deal with it’ (Terry) should be asked to participate and those who are ‘affected should get to make the decisions’ (Felicity).

4.2.3 The meaning community stakeholders assign to community engagement

Community engagement is understood by community stakeholders as the rightful opportunity for members of the community to be involved in Council decision making for decisions that affect their lives. It is postulated that participation in decision making is the community’s right. Further, the level of participation or influence should be determined by the level of impact a decision will have on an individual or group.

Community engagement, when implemented effectively, is perceived to be a valuable process providing benefits for Councils, individuals and the community. The benefits associated with community engagement are expressed as both tangible and intangible benefits, and include financial efficiencies, enhanced service delivery, capacity building, more informed decisions, and increased pride and purpose within participants. Community engagement is also understood to develop mutual respect and provide opportunities to build trust between Council and community members.

Community engagement is recognised by stakeholders as challenging to implement. Barriers to effective implementation exist, including a lack of community awareness and participation, budget and resource constraints, perceived inconsistencies and lack of objectivity. Some of these barriers can be overcome; however it is acknowledged that addressing diverse and sometimes conflicting opinions within the community is often unachievable.
There is a perception amongst community stakeholders that community engagement practice and policy does not always align. Scepticism of the community engagement process is apparent and the motivation Wollongong City Council has towards implementation is seen as questionable.

A range of unknowns exist in terms of understanding the decision making process within Council and how feedback produced through the community engagement process is used. The desire for clarity extends through each stage of the decision making process from choosing to engage, who is engaged, how feedback is used and who makes the decision.

The lack of understanding starts early in the community engagement process, concerning how the decision is made regarding if the community will be offered the opportunity to participate. The lack of understanding extends to how decisions are made concerning the level of influence the community will have.

There is a lack of clarity regarding how feedback is used by Wollongong City Council. While there is an awareness that feedback is compiled into a report there remains uncertainty towards the level of influence feedback has on the decision to be made. There is a resolute interest in understanding if and how feedback influences decisions. Council is believed to have no requirement or obligation to genuinely consider feedback when making a decision. Also unknown is the level of influence held by different stakeholder groups in decision making, as well as details of the processes that determine who and how community stakeholders are engaged.
4.2.4 Defining the levels of the Spectrum – community stakeholders

Participants were asked about their perceived definition, within the context of community engagement, of each of the five words: ‘inform’, ‘consult’, ‘involve’, ‘collaborate’ and ‘empower’, representing the five levels of the IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation. After responses were provided, participants were shown the IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum. Levels of participant awareness of the Spectrum varied, with some having full awareness of the Spectrum but most having never seen it before.

Inform

Participants used terms such as ‘tell’ and ‘notify’ when asked to define the term ‘inform’. Participants described the content of the message as ‘information’, ‘what you’ve decided’, ‘things’, ‘what is going on’, ‘what you are going to do’.
Collectively the responses are surmised as what is happening. In relation to who was being informed participants used terms such as ‘them’, ‘you’, ‘community’, ‘people’, ‘someone’, ‘public’. The words describe people, no participant used the first person.

In summary, ‘inform’ is understood by community stakeholders as Council letting people know what is happening. It is a one way process of providing information or notifying the community about a decision which has been made.

Consult

Participants understood the process of ‘consult’ as the opportunity to ‘discuss’, ‘ask’ or ‘talk’ about ‘ideas’, ‘opinions’, ‘suggestions’ in regards to ‘what is going on’, ‘what you intend’, ‘what they want’ and ‘what would work better’. Collectively participants understood ‘consult’ as asking people what their ideas are. While not
universally suggested, some participants discussed that there was no guarantee that their thoughts or ideas would be incorporated into any decisions.

In summary, ‘consult’ is understood as Council asking people what their ideas are. It is a two way interaction by which Council invites community stakeholders to provide their thoughts, opinions or suggestions on a particular pending decision. There is no guarantee stakeholder’s thoughts or ideas will be incorporated into the decision.

**Involve**

The most pertinent point to emerge during participants’ consideration of the term ‘involve’ was how unsure of the meaning they were. Phrases such as ‘I don’t know’, ‘I guess’, ‘could be’ were used when attempting to provide a definition. Many participants believed no difference existed between the terms ‘involve’ and ‘consult’ suggesting ‘involve’ is ‘the same as consult’. Participants used the term to define itself, ‘when the community get involved’, ‘be actively involved’, ‘somebody is getting involved’, ‘involvement of people’. There was an indication participants thought people have some opportunity to be included.

In summary, there is no clear understanding of ‘involve’. Generally ‘involve’ is understood to be the same process as ‘consult’.

**Collaborate**

According to participants, the premise of ‘collaborate’ is making a decision together. Participants used phrases such as ‘working together’, ‘jointly’ and ‘team’ in the context of ‘making decisions’, reaching ‘agreement on a decision’ and ‘getting the best result’. Participants discussed the greater level of equality which exists during collaboration and suggested ‘less of a power imbalance’ during the process. One
participant’s proposed definition of ‘collaborate’ is to gather information from various sources such as ‘community events and meetings’ to make a decision. Additionally, one participant did not provide a definition of ‘collaborate’, but rather suggested it was a method of keeping people who complain ‘happy’.

In summary, ‘collaborate’ is understood as Council making a decision with the community. The premise of ‘collaborate’ is making a decision together to get the best result. It is a two way process with a greater level of equality between Council and participants.

Empower

Diversity existed in participants’ understanding of ‘empower’. Two participants answered ‘I don’t know’ when asked about their understanding of the term, and saw no connection of the term to the engagement process. One participant suggested ‘empower’ is the process of ‘strengthening people’ in so much as providing ‘the resources to make [people] stronger’. Another participant suggested ‘empower’ is a ‘go get ‘em sort of attitude’. The remaining participants understood ‘empower’ in the context of authority during decision making. Phrases included ‘giving people power’, ‘everyone is being heard’ ‘community members...making the decision’ and ‘final decision making in the hands of the public’. Some participants viewed the term as dubious, suggesting it is a process of making the community believe they are making decisions when in fact they are not. Further, some participants believe the process does not exist or has never been executed by local government.

‘I don’t think the government has ever placed the final decision making in the hands of the public’ (Kerry).

‘Empower, never…. Not that I have ever seen, heard of or experienced. If you are asking me if I think it reflects Councils approach then the simple answer is no’ (Richard).

In summary, there is no clear understanding of ‘empower’ amongst community stakeholders. Some understanding exists towards ‘empower’ as community members making the final decisions, however ‘empower’ was also understood in terms of capacity building. ‘Empower’, as described in the IAP2 Spectrum, is not considered a part of the community engagement process in the context of local government, as community stakeholders believe ultimate decision making should not be made by the community.

‘Community engagement’ is understood by community stakeholders to be a two way process. The two levels described by community stakeholders, ‘consult’ and ‘collaborate’ provide the opportunity for interaction and therefore are represented in the model within the community engagement process. ‘Inform’ is understood as providing channels of communication to allow the community to know what is happening throughout the process. ‘Inform’ is understood to be an important process which is directly linked to a successful community engagement however is not participatory, therefore, while ‘inform’ is an important element, it is not recognised as a two way process and therefore not considered a level of community engagement. Unlike the IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum, community stakeholders understanding of community engagement does not include ‘involve’ and ‘empower’ levels.

4.3 Chapter summary

This chapter presented the finding from the study. The history of community engagement at Wollongong City Council and the current framework used by the
organisation to describe the community engagement process, being a modified version of the IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum, were presented, addressing research question one. The participants of Phase Two were described and themes which emerged through semi-structured interviews were presented, addressing research question two. The following chapter will provide a discussion of the findings presented in this chapter and examine the extent to which shared meaning exists, addressing research question three.
Chapter Five – Discussion of Findings

Chapter Five discusses the meaning assigned to community engagement by Wollongong City Council and community stakeholders, comparing the meaning between the two and in relation to the IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum. In doing so it addresses research question three: To what extent does shared meaning exist?

Consideration is first given to alignment of meaning assigned by Wollongong City Council and community stakeholders to the five stages of the IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum. In addition to the alignment of definition to the stages of the IAP2 Spectrum, the study findings reveal shared meaning towards other aspects of community engagement such as how the term ‘community engagement’ is defined, recognition that community engagement is a valuable activity and acknowledgement of the challenges associated with community engagement. Further, evidence was found of non-alignment in regard to aspects of community engagement, such as understanding how decisions are made and how feedback is used. The meaning assigned to the IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum from three sources, IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum, Wollongong City Council and community stakeholders, is now discussed in terms of where alignment does, and does not, exist.

5.1 The shared meaning of the IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum

The intended meaning of community engagement as defined by the IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum was provided at Figure 2-8 (provided in section 2.5.2). Moving from left to right, there is an increase in public participation and impact going from ‘inform’ on the far left to ‘empower’ on the far right. The Spectrum provides practitioners with a common language and is utilised widely by local
governments in Australia, and therefore provides the ‘intended meaning’ of community engagement for the purposes of this research.

The alignment of meaning of community engagement between (1) the IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum, (2) Wollongong City Council and (3) community stakeholders is now discussed. A summary of these findings is presented at Table 5-1.

### Table 5-1: Alignment of meaning towards levels of the IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum

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#### 5.1.1 Inform

‘Inform’ is the first level the IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum. The Spectrum explains ‘inform’ as the provision of information to the community (IAP2, 2007). Findings reveal that a similar understanding is shared by Wollongong City Council and community stakeholders. While alignment exists regarding the definition, such alignment does not extend to the term’s position in the Spectrum. The overall concept of community engagement is understood by community stakeholders as a two way process which allows interaction and the opportunity for active
involvement. Specifically, the level ‘inform’ is understood by community stakeholders as a one way process which does not provide opportunity for reciprocal interaction. According to community stakeholders, ‘inform’ is not considered participation in decision making and therefore should not hold a position in the community engagement framework.

Findings suggest shared understanding exists between IAP2 Spectrum and Wollongong City Council regarding ‘inform’, however shared meaning does not exist between IAP2 Spectrum and community stakeholders or Council and community stakeholders.

5.1.2 Consult

‘Consult’ is the second level of the IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum. The Spectrum provides a concise description suggesting ‘consult’ is ‘to obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions’ (IAP2, 2007). ‘Consult’ is the opportunity for the community to contribute their opinions. The organisation asks for input from the community and agrees to consider it before making a decision.

An equivalent meaning to that above is shared by Wollongong City Council and community stakeholders. Both agree ‘consult’ is a two way process which provides the platform for individuals to contribute their thoughts, ideas and experiences for consideration by decision makers. Community stakeholders believe the ‘consult’ stage provides no guarantee the thoughts or ideas of participants will be incorporated into the decision. Wollongong City Council states all feedback will be considered as part of the process, however, offer no commitment that feedback will be incorporated into the decisions made by Council.
The study findings have established shared meaning between the IAP2 Spectrum, Wollongong City Council and community stakeholders regarding the level ‘consult’.

5.1.3 Involve

‘Involve’ is the third level of the IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum. The Spectrum presents ‘involve’ as working ‘directly with the public throughout the process to ensure the public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered’ (IAP2, 2007). The ‘involve’ stage allows a greater level of participation and interaction with an organisation than ‘consult’. The opportunity to participate in multiple and, generally, ongoing opportunities is offered to the community. There is a greater opportunity for community stakeholder’s ideas and opinions to be understood by decision makers, however there is no opportunity provided for community stakeholders to make decisions. Decision making power remains with Council.

Council agrees the ‘involve’ level provides a greater level of interaction and opportunity for influence in the decision making process. Additionally, ‘involve’ allows the development of a deeper understanding of the decisions including constraints and opportunities by both community stakeholders and Council. The definition assigned to ‘involve’ by Wollongong City Council is Council working ‘with the community to understand issues and involve community members in designing possible solutions’ (Wollongong City Council, 2013, p. 5). The definition moves past the commitment offered in the IAP2 Spectrum to provide a commitment to community stakeholders to allow them participation in the formulation of the potential options to be considered. Fundamentally, the meaning assigned by Wollongong City Council to ‘involve’ aligns with the IAP2 Spectrum.
However, such alignment does not extend to community stakeholders. There is no clear understanding of ‘involve’ among community stakeholders. Generally ‘involve’ is understood to be the same process as ‘consult’ and is not identified as a separate stage or level of community engagement. Hence, study findings have established that alignment does not exist between Wollongong City Council and community stakeholders, or community stakeholders and the IAP2 Spectrum.

5.1.4 Collaborate

‘Collaborate’ is the fourth level of the IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum. The Spectrum details ‘collaborate’ as an organisation becoming a ‘partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution considered’ (IAP2, 2007). The level involves working together and engages the community in the decision making. The aim is to find consensus in decisions, however, the organisation maintains decision making power.

Wollongong City Council and community stakeholders both understand ‘collaborate’ as Council working together with the community to make a decision. Both Wollongong City Council and community stakeholders understand ‘collaborate’ to be a two way process with a greater level of equality between Council and the community. The study findings have established shared meaning exists between the IAP2 Spectrum, Wollongong City Council and community stakeholders regarding ‘collaborate’.

5.1.5 Empower

‘Empower’ is the final level of the IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum. The Spectrum presents ‘empower’ as ‘to place final decision making in the hands of the
public’ (IAP2, 2007). An assurance is provided to the community by the organisation that it will implement whatever the community decides. The organisation provides the opportunity for the community to make the decisions and also support a program which allows the community to be well informed before making the decision.

There is no accord between community stakeholders regarding the meaning of ‘empower’. Generally, ultimate decision making is not considered by community stakeholders as a suitable stage of community engagement in the context of local government. Community stakeholders believe Wollongong City Council should have ultimate decision making as this is the role they have been elected to perform and are supported by industry experts within the organisation.

The exclusion of ‘empower’ from the Spectrum adopted by Wollongong City Council is not necessarily evidence the meaning assigned to ‘empower’ does not align between the IAP2 Spectrum and Wollongong City Council. Council shares the meaning of ‘empower’ in the Spectrum however alignment does not exist regarding the placement of ‘empower’ in the Spectrum. Wollongong City Council considers that delegation of decision making power to the community is not suitable due to legislative requirements. Study findings have established that shared meaning exists between Wollongong City Council and community stakeholders regarding ‘empower’ however alignment was not evident between the IAP2 Spectrum and Council, or the IAP2 Spectrum and community stakeholders.

As discussed in Chapter Two, alignment of meaning is the foundation of successful relationships (Morgan and Hunt, 1994), however, Table 5-1 demonstrates that shared meaning does not exist for some elements of the IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum.
In particular, the shaded section in Table 5-1 demonstrates where alignment does and does not exist between Council and community stakeholders.

5.2 Other areas of alignment and non-alignment

In addition to revealing the meaning assigned to the different levels within the IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum, findings highlighted other areas of alignment and non-alignment between Wollongong City Council and community stakeholders. These areas of alignment and non-alignment are summarised at Table 5-2.

Table 5-2: Alignment of meaning between Wollongong City Council and community stakeholders

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspects of community engagement</th>
<th>Alignment exists</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The definition of community engagement</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The value of community engagement for both Council and community stakeholders</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenges associated with the community engagement process</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived inconsistency between theory and practice</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The perception of community engagement as a tool for manipulation</td>
<td>✗</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived understanding of how participation influences decisions</td>
<td>✗</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.2.1 The definition of community engagement

Community engagement is understood by Council and community stakeholders as the rightful opportunity for members of the community to be involved in Council decisions that affect their lives. Both parties acknowledge that community engagement is the opportunity to access local knowledge to inform and enhance decisions made by Council, and to develop trust between Council and the
community. It is evident that shared meaning exists between Council and community stakeholders regarding the definition of community engagement.

5.2.2 The value of community engagement for both Council and community stakeholders

Community engagement is understood by Wollongong City Council and community stakeholders to be a valuable process that provides benefits for Councils, participants and the wider community. Tangible and intangible benefits are associated with community engagement, including financial benefits, enhanced service delivery, capacity building, better informed decisions, increased pride and sense of purpose by community members, and greater mutual respect and trust between Council and the community. Findings indicate shared meaning exists between Wollongong City Council and community stakeholders in terms of community engagement being a valuable activity, which strengthens the process of establishing meaningful relationships.

5.2.3 Challenges associated with the community engagement process

Both Wollongong City Council and community stakeholders recognise the challenges associated with effective community engagement. The challenges identified by the two groups mirror those cited in literature (Attree et al., 2011, Eversole, 2003, Eversole, 2011, Eversole, 2012, Herriman, 2011, Kagan et al., 2005, Neshkova and Guo, 2012), and include a lack of community awareness, low rates of participation, reaching a diverse range of community stakeholders, maintaining commitment throughout sometimes lengthy processes, budget and resource constraints, perceived inconsistencies and objectivity. Some of these barriers can be overcome, however it is accepted that addressing the diverse range of opinions held by different sections of the community is often difficult to achieve. This can result in
some community members’ preferences not being reflected in the final decision and consequently interpreted by the community as Council not undertaking meaningful engagement. The study confirms shared meaning exists between Council and community stakeholders regarding the challenges associated with community engagement.

5.2.4 Perceived inconsistency between policy and practice

Community engagement as defined in Wollongong City Council’s Engagement Policy is viewed positively by community stakeholders, however it is perceived written detail does not necessarily reflect lived experience. One cause of the perceived inconsistency is the delivery of community engagement being heavily determined by staff opinion. For example, a project manager who is risk adverse may offer minimal community engagement and provide limited information to the community. Additionally, staff members who believe community engagement adds little value to a project may not provide opportunities for the community to participate in decisions associated with that project.

The interview with a Wollongong City Council spokesperson revealed the approach to community engagement varies between individuals within Council. It was acknowledged that, despite the concept of community engagement being endorsed by Wollongong City Council for over a decade; there is still inconsistency in the way community engagement is understood and also varying levels of commitment. Some staff understand community engagement to be the distribution of letters or promotional activities. This lack of understanding can result in staff believing they are meeting community engagement requirements when in fact they are not. There is a sense the Community Engagement Policy is a document which governs the
Community Engagement Team, and not necessarily Council as a whole. A lack of clarity among staff has been identified by Council and measures continue to be implemented in an effort to enhance consistency across the organisation. Wollongong City Council and community stakeholders’ share the understanding a disconnect exists, and recognise staff attitude and understanding contributes to this inconsistency.

5.2.5 The perception of community engagement as a tool for manipulation
Among community stakeholders, skepticism exists about Council’s motivation for implementation of community engagement initiatives. Community stakeholders believe decisions are sometimes made by Council before community engagement activities are undertaken. They also consider the engagement process as a way of creating legitimacy by Council, and as a tool for making the community believe they are involved in decision making.

Wollongong City Council acknowledges that on occasions decisions do not necessarily reflect the views of everyone involved. Council claim it tries to involve the community in decision making; however given the diverse and often contradictory views in the community, and the predetermined constraints in which they often operate, it is not realistic that everyone’s requests be accommodated.

Findings show that Council and community stakeholder beliefs are not shared in relation to community engagement being used as a tool for manipulation.

5.2.6 Perceived understanding of how participation influences decisions
Wollongong City Council’s Community Engagement Policy states that all feedback received in relation to a particular decision is analysed and compiled into a report for
consideration by decision makers. The Policy details who the decision makers are and specifies feedback is one of a number of information sources used to guide decision making. While Wollongong City Council believes that sufficient detail regarding how feedback is used and decisions are made is provided, community stakeholders do not share this view.

For community stakeholders, a range of unknowns exist in terms of understanding the decision making process and how feedback produced through the community engagement process is used by Wollongong City Council. There is desire for greater understanding or clearer direction in how decisions are made with particular focus on how feedback is incorporated into the decision making process.

Shared meaning does not exist between Wollongong City Council community stakeholders regarding how feedback is used and the level of influence community stakeholders have in decisions.

5.3 Increasing shared meaning

In order to create greater alignment between Council and community stakeholders in terms of the meaning assigned to community engagement, it is recommended that Council should:

1. **Introduce a new model of community engagement** to more accurately reflect the meaning shared by Council and community stakeholders;

2. **Develop and implement a social marketing strategy** to increase community stakeholder and Council staff knowledge and understanding of this new framework; and
3. **Develop a tool to increase awareness of how Council decisions are made**
   and the role of community engagement in this process.

These three recommendations are explained in more detail in the following sections.

### 5.3.1 Recommendation One: Introduce a new model of community engagement

To harness the known benefits of shared meaning, a new model of community engagement should be introduced by Council which reflects the shared meaning identified in this study. The new model should be moulded to the specific needs of a local government context. For example, the title of the IAP2 Spectrum is disconnected from the terminology used by community stakeholders and Wollongong City Council to describe the process of involving the community in decision making. The IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum provides no reference or association with the term community engagement, and includes an ‘empower’ level which is viewed by community stakeholders and Council as irrelevant in the context of community engagement in local government. Furthermore, based on community stakeholders understanding, consideration is given to the necessity of the ‘involve’ level and the position of the ‘inform’ level within a model.

Revising the Spectrum to suit particular contexts, such as local government, is a notion supported by industry professionals (IAP2 Canada, 2015, Roy McCallum, 2015, Newberry, 2015, Reviewing the IAP2 Spectrum, 2015, IAP2 at 25, 2015). A review of the Spectrum is currently being driven by the Canadian constituent of IAP2 (IAP2 Canada, 2015) in response to suggestions the Spectrum needs to be ‘refreshed…to reflect current and emerging public participation practice’ (IAP2 Canada, 2015). One of the core elements being reviewed is the position ‘inform’ holds in the Spectrum. Like community stakeholders, many practitioners believe
‘inform’ should not be included in the Spectrum because it is not considered a form of participation (Reviewing the IAP2 Spectrum, 2015).

Further evidence of industry’s desire to revise the Spectrum was demonstrated at the 2015 IAP2 Australasian Conference held in Perth, Australia. One conference session, ‘The Spectrum on Trial’ (IAP2 Australia, 2015), allowed industry professionals to discuss their thoughts on the Spectrum in terms of its relevance to the current engagement climate. A poll was taken which allowed conference participants to vote regarding their position on the future of the Spectrum. Four options were provide: (1) make no changes, (2) make changes, (3) only use with other tools or (4) abolish the framework. Approximately 65 per cent of participants agreed that the Spectrum needs to be revised.

For these reasons, it is recommended that a new model be adopted by Wollongong City Council which reflects the alignment of meaning between Council and community stakeholders.

**A proposed Model of Community Engagement in Local Government**

Based on the findings of this study, a new model for community engagement within the context of local government is presented in Figure 5-1.
Figure 5-1: Proposed Model of Community Engagement in Local Government

The proposed model of community engagement in local government (Figure 5-1) presents two categories of community engagement within the context of local government; ‘consult’ (green text) and ‘collaborate’ (blue text). Community stakeholder involvement is recognised as a fluid process, which may see more or less involvement at different stages of the decision making process. For this reason, there are no distinct stages detailed between ‘consult’ and ‘collaborate’ rather they exist in the common space of community engagement (shown as the purple shaded area). ‘Inform’ is recognised as integral to the role of local government and a necessary outcome of community engagement. Keeping the community up to date on decision process, opportunities and outcomes is integral to building and maintaining relationships, however, it does not involve community stakeholders’ participation in decision making. Therefore, ‘inform’ (red box and text) is positioned outside of the community engagement process, however traverses the entire process. Arrows are used to represent how the information from the decision making process is used as
the information in the ‘inform’ stage (shown at the bottom centre of the purple decision making area). The model also suggests that decision making power and personal commitment (shown as a grey arrow) decreases or increases between ‘consult’ to ‘collaborate’. The new model offers six key points of difference to the IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum as outlined in the following sections.

(1) ‘Inform’ sits outside community involvement in decision making

Council has a responsibility to communicate effectively with the community, including in relation to decision making. Providing information on decisions helps community stakeholders understand the situation, the potential impacts and justification for decisions made. ‘Inform’ is a commitment to make information about a decision available to the community and to participants in the decision making process. There are various aspects of the decision making process which can be communicated, such as what decision is pending, information relevant to meaningfully contribute to a decision and what decision was made, how it was made and why it was made. Community stakeholders may not have been given the opportunity to participate in the decision, however Council commits to making information about the decision available. Alternatively, community stakeholders may have had the opportunity to participate and Council commits to make the information available to both those who did participate and those who did not. Informing the community does not involve community participation. While important, ‘inform’ does not allow involvement in the decision making process. For these reasons ‘inform’ is included as part of the community engagement model but lies outside the continuum of participation.
(2) A simplified model with fewer levels of engagement

The proposed model does not include ‘involve’ or ‘empower’. ‘Empower’ is not included in the model as study findings showed Council and community stakeholders both agree it is not required. Shared meaning exists, therefore this is reflected through its exclusion from the proposed model. The model also does not include ‘involve’. ‘Involve’ is seen as the same as ‘consult’ according community stakeholders and it adds no additional value in the context of community engagement. The language used by Council to define ‘involve’ offers no difference to that used to define ‘collaborate’. To address this, the model presents community engagement without distinct stage but rather as a fluid process.

(3) Community engagement as a fluid process

The Spectrum details clear levels of participation, however results of this study suggest community engagement is a fluid process by which varying levels of community stakeholder involvement can occur throughout an engagement process. The model does not include steps, stages or division between one level of engagement and another, reflecting the nature of community engagement which changes gradually without any distinct dividing points. Community stakeholders can be involved in different levels throughout the engagement experience. The model also allows the non-alignment of meaning towards ‘involve’ to be addressed, as it allows Council’s definition if ‘involve’ to be implemented through the concepts of ‘consult’ and ‘collaborate’. For example, ‘involve’ is understood to be inviting community stakeholders to participate in decision making regarding determining options. The model positions such activity toward ‘collaborate’ as community stakeholders are making decisions with Council. The next phase of the decision
making may be to determine what the preferred option is, therefore the engagement will move back towards ‘consult’.

(4) Revised terminology used to name the model
Council and community stakeholders both understand ‘community engagement’ to be the term used to describe community stakeholders’ involvement in Council decision making processes. The IAP2 Spectrum refers to ‘public participation’ which is not terminology used by Council or community stakeholders to describe the process. Therefore, the language used to describe the model is ‘community engagement’. Additionally, the model has been developed using study findings within the context of local government, therefore this is acknowledged in the title of the model.

(5) No indication of level of influence
The IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum indicates the level of influence on a decision increases through progression of the levels such that there is less influence achieved in the ‘consult’ level and more achieved in the ‘collaborate’ level. Study findings indicate the level of influence is not determined by the level of participation. Those providing feedback through the ‘consult’ phase can have significant influence. Based on the findings, there are various factors which can influence a decision including the level of impact a decision will have on a stakeholder or stakeholder group, or if feedback obtained through the community engagement process includes information Council was not privy too. These aspects are not determined by the level of participation; therefore reference to increasing influence is not reflected in the new model.
(6) Depicts increasing or decreasing decision making power and personal commitment

The model demonstrates decision making power and personal commitment, depicted by grey arrow, indicating the level for each of these increases the closer an engagement process moves towards ‘collaboration’ or decreases when moving towards ‘consult’. The inclusion of the arrow aims to address the shortcoming in understanding by community stakeholders towards the level of impact their participation has. The arrow indicates an increase in power as the process moves from ‘consult’ to ‘collaborate’. The same occurs regarding personal commitment. The level of commitment, in particular time, increases alongside the level of decision making power.

5.3.2 Recommendation Two: Develop and implement a social marketing strategy

In order to develop and maintain trust and commitment (Morgan and Hunt, 1994) and harness the known benefits of relationship marketing, such as increased stability and security (Gummesson, 1997), increased transactions, reduced costs and greater efficiency, (Zeithaml and Bitner, 1996), strategies need to be implemented to ensure consistency in meaning. It is necessary community stakeholders understand the value Council places in involving them in decision making, are prompted to become involved and continue that involvement. Undertaking a communications campaign with Council staff, also known as internal marketing, is also vital to effective relationship marketing and is essential for successful external marketing campaigns (George, 1990). Internal marketing can provide staff with understanding about individual roles, insight into community perspectives and reaffirm Council objectives. The actions of Council staff are influenced by principles inherent in
relationship marketing such as cooperation, constancy and trust. These actions include what staff members say, how they behave and the attitudes they convey to the community during interactions. The outcome of interactions between Council staff and community stakeholders is a critical factor which influences the success of any relationship marketing strategies.

To achieve shared meaning a marketing strategy should be implemented which effectively communicates Council’s adopted model of community engagement, most suitably ‘The Model of Community Engagement and Local Government’. Social marketing theory provides a framework in which such a campaign can be developed. Social marketing applies marketing principles, tools and techniques to create, communicate and deliver value in order to influence target audience behaviours that benefit individuals and society as a whole (Kotler and Lee, 2008). Social marketing campaigns typically include five key steps: (1) conducting research and analysing the environment, (2) segmentation of the market and identifying key target audiences, (3) setting objectives and goals, (4) making decisions regarding the 4P’s: Product, Price, Place and Promotion (communication) and (5) evaluating the campaign.

The steps for social marketing, as established by Kotler and Lee (2008), provide a framework for developing a successful communications campaign to create alignment of meaning between Council and the community. The aim is to educate Council staff and community stakeholders in order to change attitudes, empower them though the provision of deeper understanding, in turn reduce skepticism and negative perceptions and ultimately increase Council staff and community stakeholders’ participation in community engagement. The stages of such a social marketing campaign are discussed in the following sections.
(1) Research and analysis of the environment

It is necessary to first develop an understanding of how Council staff and community stakeholders behave and what influences their participation in community engagement. It is beneficial to investigate what other Councils or organisations are implementing to assist in identifying best practices and establish the best methods and communication channels. The findings from this study go towards achieving this aim by providing insight into the current environment regarding community engagement and the meaning applied to this term by Council and community stakeholders.

(2) Segmentation and targeting

Segmentation and targeting involves identification and selection of target audiences for the marketing campaign (Kotler and Lee, 2008). Segmentation is a process of identifying groups of individuals within the general population that are similar to each other in some way, for example socio-demographic characteristics or geographic location. Targeting involves deciding which potential segments will be the primary target of marketing efforts, which then influences the messages most likely to resonate with this group (what you say) and the media channels most likely to reach them (where you say it).

The social marketing campaign for community engagement with Council includes two key target groups: Council staff and community stakeholders. Within each of these a number of sub-segments exist, as summarised in Figure 5-2. The sub-segments have been established based on the Wollongong City Council’s organisational structure (Wollongong City Council, 2012a) and definition of community (Wollongong City Council, 2013). Focus should be placed on sub-
segments which will result in a greater level of impact (Kotler and Lee, 2008). In the Council target group, priority sub-segments are managers and staff who engage, as they have the most influence in community engagement in the context of local government. Councillors are not governed by the Community Engagement Policy and staff who do not engage are not required to implement community engagement and therefore have limited influence. Priority sub segments within the community target group priority are residents and business owners, this is followed by agencies. The sub-segment visitors are somewhat transient, and community groups generally consist of residents and are therefore already be included as target segments. The priority sub-segments for the social marketing campaign are shaded green in Figure 5-2.

Figure 5-2: Overview of segments
(3) Objectives and goals

There are a range of objectives and goals that can be established for a social marketing campaign. Objectives must be realistic and measurable and establish targets for behavioural change (Kotler and Lee, 2008). For this campaign, objectives and goals involve (1) educating community members and Council staff about community engagement, and (2) prompting them to become and remain involved. More specifically, the primary objective is to (3) increase alignment of meaning between the groups, in turn, increasing trust and commitment.

(4) The 4 P’s

The concept of the ‘4P’s’ is commonly used in commercial and social marketing and refers to Product, Price, Place and Promotion (Kotler and Lee, 2008).

Product refers to the behaviour the social marketing campaign is aiming to change. In this instance educate the public on community engagement such that they have an accurate understanding of the process and are more likely to become engaged with realistic expectations.

Price refers to the personal cost or benefit of performing the target behaviour, and includes the potential cost or benefit of giving up alternative behaviours (Kotler and Lee, 2008). In the case of community engagement, it allows people to feel valued and appreciated, and as Hugh Mackay (2010) suggests, the desire to be taken seriously is the most significant social desire. Benefits also directly affect physical and mental health (Attree et al., 2011). The benefit of community engagement to the broader community include increasing representation and involvement of the public in decision making and improved the quality and legitimacy of decisions made (Barnes et al., 2003, p. 379). Further, community engagement results in decisions
which meet the community’s needs (Baker, 2006) and ‘shared visions and commitment to solutions’ (Wollongong City Council, 2013, p. 2).

Place refers to where and how people can access or engage in the behaviour of interest. In the context of community engagement ‘Place’ refers to the accessibility of community engagement, or how easy it is to become engaged in the process using the different channels made available by Council.

Promotion relates to communicating the message, and involves decisions regarding the types of messages to communicate and how to communicate them in order to reach the target audience. In the case of community engagement this includes deciding which aspects of the process to promote. The campaign should focus on the new model as it delivers a simple, clear message and provides a foundation for shared meaning to be established.

The 4P’s provide the method for building awareness, creating positive attitudes and establishing buy in for the particular behaviour of interest. An effective 4P strategy will result in increased awareness and knowledge and increased participation (Kotler and Lee, 2008). It is through these mechanisms that shared meaning is created and provides the platform for the interaction to move into the relationship marketing arena, shifting focus from the broader audience to individuals.

A strategy to influence change in community stakeholders’ understanding of community engagement should involve inclusion of the ‘Model of Community Engagement in Local Government’ (Figure 5-1) in communication tools such as Frequently Asked Questions, Councils website and social media tools. The model
could be on display at community engagement events as well as business cards directing people to visit the website in order to increase access to this information.

A strategy to influence change in Council staff understanding of community engagement could include online and face to face training, utilisation of internal communication methods such as intranet portal and staff newsletters, communications through team meetings, distribution of promotional materials such as business cards directing to staff to the community engagement team and relevant information, workplace screen savers, email tag line and implementation of programs that recognise and reward staff who continue to demonstrate excellence and exceed expectation in the development and delivery of community engagement.

(5) Evaluation

Evaluation of a social marketing campaign should be based on the stated objectives, and the process for evaluation should be determined prior to the campaign commencing. The evaluation should establish what will be measured, how it will be measured, when the evaluation will occur and who will be responsible for implementing it (Department of Premier and Cabinet, 2015, Evaluation Toolbox, 2010, The State of Queensland, 2011). Wollongong City Council conducts a biannual ‘community survey’ (Wollongong City Council, 2014) which includes questions relating to community engagement (I.R.I.S., 2012, I.R.I.S., 2014). These elements should be used as an evaluative process for the social marketing strategy implemented by Council. Key indicators may include (1) the level of awareness and understanding of the new model, (2) level of understanding of community involvement in the decision making process, (3) participation rates in community engagement and community stakeholder’s levels of trust towards Council.
5.3.3 Recommendation Three: Develop a tool to increase awareness of how Council decisions are made

Study findings revealed that community stakeholders had limited understanding of Council’s decision making process and how their input might affect decisions. In attempt to address the inconsistency in understanding, a illustrative model has been developed which can be used as a tool in the ‘Promotion’ stage of the social marketing campaign to provide greater understanding of the decision making process within the context of local government. The tool is based on the proposed ‘Model of Community Engagement in Local Government’ illustrated at Figure 5-1 and aims to improve attitudes towards community engagement through building a common understanding, in turn increasing trust. Educating the community about the decision making process creates a greater understanding of the feedback process. Establishing shared meaning decreases barriers to participation such as perceptions of manipulation and scepticism towards how feedback is used.

Based on other rational decision making models (Simon, 1976, Taylor, 1998, Wiktorowicz and Deber, 1997), Figure 5-3 captures how Council decisions are made in four key stages (indicated in grey shading): (1) defining the situation, (2) determining the alternatives, (3) gathering information and (4) selecting the action. The model introduces each stage of the process and provides a simple explanation of what occurs. The second tier (in black and colour) provides instruction on which level of community engagement correlates with each stage of the decision making process. For example, ‘consult’ occurs in the ‘gather information’ stage while ‘collaborate’ can occur at any or all of the stages.
The Decision Making Process

A situation requiring a decision can arise from a range of sources including a community request, need for infrastructure renewal/repair, funding opportunity, strategy development, legislation and Councillor request.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Define the Situation</th>
<th>Determine alternatives</th>
<th>Gather information</th>
<th>Select Action</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The situation and the decision/s which needs to be made are clearly outlined. Who will be involved in making the decision and the process which will be undertaken to achieve the action will be defined.</td>
<td>The situation will be brainstormed, looking at the alternatives and different possibilities. The situation will be considered from different perspectives. One or more alternatives may be presented to the next phase of decision making.</td>
<td>A range of information is collected about the situation including community feedback, legislation, Council policies &amp; resolutions, technical and professional assessment, industry best practice and the Quadruple bottom line (economic, environmental, social and governance).</td>
<td>After careful consideration of the alternatives and available information relating to the situation, including risks, the decision makers determine what the action will be.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Level of Community Involvement

The level of community involvement will depend on legislative requirements, the issue, scope, timing, community interest, available resources and impact on community stakeholders.

- Collaborate: Community stakeholders will work with Council to define the situation and what engagement process is required.
- Consult: Community stakeholders will work with Council to determine the alternatives and possibilities.
- Inform: Community stakeholders will work with Council to collect and review information related to the decision.
- Inform: Community stakeholders will work with Council to make a decision on a preferred solution.

Community stakeholders will work with Council to define the situation and what engagement process is required. Community stakeholders will work with Council to determine the alternatives and possibilities. Community stakeholders will work with Council to collect and review information related to the decision. Community stakeholders will work with Council to make a decision on a preferred solution.

Consult: Community stakeholders will be given the opportunity to provide feedback on the pending decision.

Inform: Council will let the community know what is happening throughout the decision making process. This includes providing information to assist community stakeholders involved in making the decision and providing updates to those affected and the broader community. Different levels and methods of communication will be used depending on the impact a decision has on a community stakeholder.

Figure 5-3: A tool to increase understanding of the decision making process in local government

Community stakeholders are unsure how their feedback is used. The tool details how feedback forms one part of the information gathering stage. It illustrates the range of information which influences a decision, highlighting community feedback is not the only element which must be considered.
5.9 Chapter summary

Chapter Five discussed the degree of alignment between the meaning assigned by Wollongong City Council and community stakeholders to the term community engagement. Alignment of meaning extended only to the terms ‘consult’ and ‘collaborate’. Further shared meaning was found for relevant aspects outside the framework of the Spectrum, including how the term ‘community engagement’ is defined, recognition that community engagement is a valuable activity and acknowledgement that it is a challenging process. Non-alignment was found in various aspects including understanding of how decisions are made and how feedback is used. Strategies for increasing alignment of meanings were suggested (1) Council adopting a new model to inform community engagement activities, the ‘Model of Community Engagement in Local Government’ – which reflects shared meaning between Council and community stakeholders. (2) the development and implementation of social marketing strategies targeting both Council staff and community stakeholders and; (3) introducing a tool which increases awareness and knowledge regarding the decision making process.
Chapter Six – Conclusion and Contributions

6.1 Summary of the research

As explored in Chapter Two, community engagement literature includes a range of terminology and definitions, however does not provide insight into the meaning of community engagement from the perspective of community stakeholders. This study contributes to understanding of the meaning community stakeholders assign to community engagement and determine if alignment of meaning exists. The importance of alignment is established through theoretical frameworks including relationship marketing, Commitment-Trust Theory and shared meaning.

The context of community engagement in local government was presented. Legislation constructs the criteria for local government, Council, to undertake community engagement and establishes the minimum requirements. In order to achieve these requirements, Councils adopt policy guided by frameworks, commonly, the IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum. Such is the case for Wollongong City Council, the local government authority of the research location, therefore, the meaning community stakeholders assign to community engagement was considered in the context of the Spectrum.

To establish the meaning assigned to community engagement data collection and analysis was undertaken using interpretative phenomenology, which involves analysis and interpretation of data to identify themes from individuals’ lived experiences. Data was collected by way of archival analysis and in-depth semi-structured interviews. The emerging data was subject to comprehensive exploration by the researcher and supervisors. A validation process was undertaken with the data to ensure accuracy of the interpretation including review of transcripts, peer review
and member checking. As a result, the lived experience as shared by the participants has been explored, interpreted, validated and described.

According to findings, the decision making process is applied in two streams, provision of information and community engagement. The information process is one directional. In contrast, the community engagement process allows messages to move between Council and community stakeholders. It is within this interaction that relationship marketing is necessary. Creating effective two-way communication, focusing on improving interactions with the aim of increasing trust and commitment, is a relationship marketing challenge. Central to a relationship marketing approach is commitment and trust which is based upon shared meanings (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). The IAP2 attempted to address the issues associated with consistency in community engagement language by developing the IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum. The Spectrum provides a common language and guiding principles, however, the findings of this study indicate that it fails to reflect the meaning of community engagement from Council and community stakeholders’ perspective. As presented by Commitment-Trust Theory (Morgan and Hunt, 1994), shared meaning towards community engagement must exist in order to harness the range of benefits offered by both successful community engagement and positive relationship marketing.

The essence of meaning assigned by community stakeholders to the term community engagement was established as the rightful opportunity for members of the community to be involved in Council decisions that affect their lives, and this meaning was shared by Council.
As summarised in Table 5-1 and Table 5-2, the study revealed that alignment and non-alignment existed in a range of areas. Both acknowledged the value and challenges of community engagement for participants and Council alike. Such alignment did not extend to the understanding of how decisions are made, in particular, how community feedback is used and how it influences decisions. Further, it was established these areas were influenced by trust, knowledge, perceived objectives and perceived value and impacts. These areas directly impact the communication and relationship process. The meaning Council and community stakeholders assign to community engagement directly influence their relationship. Non-alignment creates a breakdown in the process and negatively affects trust and commitment, in turn community engagement.

Suggestions for addressing non-alignment were presented including adoption by Council of the new ‘Model of Community Engagement in Local Government’ (Figure 5-1) and the development and implementation of communication and social marketing strategies. Further, an illustrative tool was proposed to help inform the community about how Council decisions are made and how community engagement fits within this process.

6.2 Contributions

The research has implications for literature, theory and practice. Findings from this study contribute to the research literature of community engagement and marketing. The research contributes to community engagement literature generally, and specifically community engagement within the context of local government, an area research is required (Barbaro, 2006, Herriman, 2011). The inconsistency of community engagement language was highlighted and the importance of shared
meaning in the context of community engagement was established. Further, empirical data was presented, providing insight into community engagement from the perspective of community stakeholders was provided and it was established where alignment of meaning does and does not exist in the context of local government. Also, community stakeholders do not believe the level ‘empower’ is relevant in the context of local government.

The research contributes to marketing literature by highlighting the relationship between marketing and community engagement within a local government context. Relationship marketing strategies directly reflect those required for effective community engagement and draws attention to the importance of shared values to create and maintain trust and commitment. The study highlights the need for relationship marketing and social marketing concepts and how they contribute positively to the goal of effective community engagement.

6.2.1 Theoretical contributions
The data compiled through this research was used to analyse the alignment of meanings assigned by community stakeholders and Council towards the IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum. The research identified disconnect between the IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum and the meaning assigned by both Council and community stakeholders. Based on the findings, the Spectrum was critiqued and recommendations provided in relation to how to improve the Spectrum for the local government context.

It was identified the IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum does not reflect the community engagement process in the context of local government. To address this shortcoming, the ‘Model of Community Engagement in Local Government’ was
proposed as a more appropriate model as the basis for community engagement in local government. Further, to address the lack of understanding of the decision making process established by the study, a marketing tool is presented which can be used to provide greater understanding of the decision making process within the context of local government.

6.2.2 Practical contributions

Practically, governments can utilise the findings presented here to develop community engagement training programs for Council staff and an implementation resource kit which is founded on a common understanding towards community engagement. Relationships between Council and community stakeholders have the opportunity to be built on a foundation of shared meaning, which increases trust and commitment. This will contribute to increased benefits for both Council and the community, as detailed in Chapter Two. These include improved quality and legitimacy of decisions made, community ‘buy in’ on decisions, reduced delivery times and budget savings (Herriman, 2011, International Association for Public Participation, 2006). Other benefits include positive changes to participants’ physical and mental health (Attree et al., 2011), people feeling included in their community and decisions being made that meet the community’s needs.

Adopting the findings and recommendations of the present study contributes to more robust community engagement policy and is likely to increase the effectiveness of decision making within local governments. In summary, the research:

1. Establishes the understanding of community engagement from community stakeholders’ perspectives;
2. Develops a new model of community engagement in the context of local government which is founded on common understanding;
3. Develops a marketing tool to increase understanding of Council’s decision making process and how community input influences decisions
4. Contributes to more robust community engagement policy and increases the effectiveness of decision making processes with local government;
5. Highlights the relationship between marketing and community engagement
6. Provides the foundation for effective social marketing strategies;
7. Aids the improvement of relationships between Council and community;
8. Guides the development of community engagement training programs.

6.3 Limitations

The purpose of this interpretative phenomenological study was to build better understanding of the meaning community stakeholders assign to community engagement specifically in the context of local government. Community engagement is undertaken by a range of organisations within society, including for example private enterprise and not-for-profit organisations, and it is possible that participants’ experiences with other such organisations in the past may have influenced their understanding provided in this study.

The methodology explores the lived experiences of individuals, a subjective method of enquiry. While the lived experiences of participants are real to them, they are not necessarily representative of everyone. All participants were from the same large local government area, Wollongong City Council area, which has a strong community engagement focus and a relatively well-resourced team. Councils vary in size, commitment to community engagement and available resources, which presents
vulnerability when generalised statements are made relating to the meaning community stakeholders assign to community engagement.

Underpinning this study is the assumption that similarities exist between different levels of government. While it is likely that a study conducted in the Wollongong local government area has relevance to other levels of government throughout Australia and internationally, it is acknowledged that the needs and socio-demographic composition of the communities can differ significantly. The recommendations and implications presented here may not be relevant for every authority, however they intend to provide insight into the meaning that exist in one area.

The sample of the study could be argued to homogenous. The perspectives of particular community groups, for example people with a disability, children, young people and older people, have not been included in the study due to the limits of time and resources of Masters-level research. Therefore, the extent to which findings apply to diverse groups within the community is also unknown.

To identify the potential diversity in responses, the participant sample was categorised into ‘active’ and ‘passive’ participation with Wollongong City Council. It would have been unfeasible to undertake such in depth research with a greater number of participants, also due to the limitations, for example time and resources, associated with a Masters-level research project.

Two conceptual models were introduced in Chapter Five. While these models were developed based on the insights emerging from this study, at this point they have not
been empirically tested or validated. Validation or testing will further strengthen each model’s position within community engagement and local government.

While the researcher did not hold this position during the research period, it is possible that participant responses may have been influenced due to their perceived impact on any future interactions with Council. Further, participant responses may have been influenced by social desirability bias, whereby their answers reflected what they believe to be socially acceptable rather than being a reflection of their true thoughts and feelings. Prior to being interviewed, participants were informed that their identity would remain confidential and participation would not impact the relationship with the researcher, the Council or the University of Wollongong.

Researcher bias is difficult to avoid in a qualitative study which requires analysis into what might be considered an emotive and personal topic. Based on the researcher’s interest and experience in community engagement a potential for bias towards the findings of the research existed. To minimise this risk, a multistage approach was undertaken to validate the data including a review of transcripts, peer review and member checking.

6.4 Future research

Study findings offer a number of areas for further research. Participant experiences of community engagement centred on eight themes, each of which could serve as an individual area for more in-depth future research.

The core of community engagement could be further researched, utilising the same methodology, with additional samples to produce more generalisable results. As local government areas vary in size, cultural makeup and socio-demographics and
level of commitment to community engagement, populations reflecting this variety could be studied. Further, the study could be undertaken with a greater diversity in participants, in particular, age, cultural background and people with a disability.

The benefits of being involved in decision making include gaining experience, confidence and knowledge. Personal experiences and interests allow individuals to express their views, personalities, desires and goals as well as to reflect on what they consider to be important in life. To maximise the benefits of community engagement, additional research should be undertaken to develop a greater understanding on how individual’s personal experiences and interests influence their understanding regarding the decisions made by Councils.

Perceived personal impacts were found to be a motivator for participation in community engagement activities. Additional research could develop greater understanding regarding what these impacts are, how they influence participation, either positively or negatively, and what ability Council has to influence the impacts to encourage greater levels of involvement.

Community engagement is understood by all parties examined here to be a valuable process which provides both tangible and intangible benefits for all stakeholders. Community engagement provides the opportunity for the community to have input into decisions that affect their lives, allows the decision making process to be more informed and can build trust and respect. It also builds community capacity and can be financially beneficial to Council. Future research could develop greater understanding of the value of community engagement in areas such as professional development, capacity building, organisation development and resourcing.
This study also identified numerous challenges associated with the community engagement process. These included a lack of community awareness and participation, budget and resource constraints, perceived inconsistencies and the inability to accommodate all opinions within a diverse community. Future research could further investigate these challenging aspects to develop a greater understanding of how they are established, the effects they have on the process and how each can be minimised or eliminated.

Findings illustrate that community stakeholders perceive inconsistencies between community engagement policy and practice. There is also a perception community engagement is used by Council as a tool for manipulation. Future research could provide greater understanding of these perceptions, how they are developed, consequences of their existence and possible ways of changing them through more sophisticated use of marketing techniques.

One of the most prevalent themes to emerge from this study was the perceived lack of transparency in relation to how community stakeholders’ feedback is used for decision making. The local government decision making process is unclear to many community stakeholders and does not clarify how much influence they actually have. A tool to assist with this has been presented based on the findings of the study. Additional research could be undertaken to test the tool and establish empirical data.

The study revealed a lack of consistency in the meaning assigned to community engagement by Council staff. The scope of the present study did not allow for this to be examined in detail; however strategies were provided to align the meaning assigned to community engagement by Council staff, managers and Councillors.
Finally, there is currently limited research into relationship marketing and government, in particular the local government sector. Evidence suggests there is rising demand in the community for increased involvement in decision making and accountability by governments (Barbaro, 2006, Herriman, 2011). Generating community interest and participation in such initiatives is a marketing challenge. Local governments need to communicate the engagement initiatives effectively, encourage individuals to become involved and maintain their involvement. This study has focused on community engagement; however the opportunity exists to research other areas which relate to relationship marketing in local government such as customer service, library services, property management and community services.
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Appendix E – Interview Guide

Can you tell me a bit about yourself and your history with local government?

Have you been involved in any decision making processes with Wollongong City Council?

If yes, what are your memories?

If no, is there a reason?

What is your understanding on the types of decisions Councils have to make?

In your opinion, what involvement should the community have in the decisions?

What does the term community engagement mean to you?

What do these terms mean to you?

Inform
Consult
Involve
Collaborate
Empower

In your opinion, what value does community engagement have?

What memories do you have that you believe helped to create these understandings?

How would you describe your level of trust toward Wollongong City Council?

Do you know that WCC has a CE Policy? Have you ever read it?

If yes, do you believe that the meaning intended by WCC and your meaning of CE align?

Are there any additional comments or thoughts you would like to provide?
Appendix G – Compilation of excerpts from researcher reflection activities

‘I start this study recognising that individual’s behaviour in the context of community engagement with local government is different and questioning why people do not participate. I have seen the inconsistencies in the way people interpret the IAP2 spectrum. I appreciate the value meaningful community engagement brings to both the organisation and the community. I use the term meaningful as I do not always believe engagement processes are meaningful. Based on my previous experiences I believe that the communities, and the individuals they consist of, are diverse and ever intriguing.’

‘I have lived in Wollongong Local Government Area for the greater part of my life, I have worked for the Wollongong Council for 12 years and nearby Kiama Council for a period of 3 years prior. I have held various positions, most recently in the role of Community Engagement Officer. Upon deciding to undertake the research project I sought suitable opportunities for secondment within the organisation to reduce the potential ethical issues associated with undertaking research while in the role of Engagement Officer. I took two years leave from the role during the research period.’

‘I have a healthy knowledge of the services local governments provide, the contexts in which they need to deliver these services and the processes required to implement them. I understand Wollongong City Council has a plethora of diverse decisions to make, many of which directly affect me. I have never participated in a community engagement activity with Wollongong City Council. I know they exist, I know how to participate, I know how the system works. I spruik the importance of participation with local government and yet I do not participate myself. I perhaps take for granted that decisions will be made and life in Wollongong will continue to prosper.’

‘I was part of the engagement team for the Integrated Planning and Reporting, which saw the development of the Community Strategic Plan ‘Wollongong 2022’. I took home the suite of documents to review over the weekend in preparation of upcoming discussions with the community. The weekend happened to be when I was on a social trip away with a group friends. Relaxing in the winter sun I took out the documents, hundreds of pages, to read. My holidaying companions asked what I was reading; my response prompted comments suggesting the documents would be best used as a fire starter or a pillow. Further discussion established these people had no desire to be involved in decisions made by Council. It was this weekend that prompted me to focus my thinking on why people don’t participate in engagement opportunities.’

‘There are numerous reasons that people might not participate in decision making: time poor, reduced social capital, trust or lack of trust of government, topics do not interests them, they would simply prefer to use their time watching the football, they are unaware community engagement exists or they don’t understand what it is.’

‘I began to question my own motivations, or lack thereof in relation to participating in decision making. Even voting is a chore. It was work colleagues in the community development industry which enlightened me to the relevance of political parties in power and the effect the leading party has on funding, in particular regarding the programs I was coordinating. It was not until someone who was passionate and informed took the time to demonstrate the significance of something that was
important to me that I became interested in understanding more about who my vote was going to. I am yet to participate in any form of participatory democracy, other than designing and implementing the strategy.’

‘I have attended IAP2 training courses including planning, tools and techniques and influencing. I have had ongoing discussions with Wollongong City Council staff about the IAP2 spectrum. There are two aspects which I regularly challenge: inform and empower. The engagement team spends significant time implementing Councils notification policy. I regard ‘inform’ as a one way process. The community is not being asked to participate in a decision making process, they are being made aware of a decision that has already been made. I would suggest that inform is a communication method used within the scope of engagement but not a step in a participation spectrum. My understanding of empower is informed through my community development background. To empower individuals and communities is to build capacity. I would suggest that there are certain decisions by which the community can be given decision making power within a local government context. For example naming a building, deciding what activity will be run from an allocated budget. Community facilities are often licenced to community groups, who then determine the day to day running of the facility. While this is under a licence agreement, many of the decisions are made by the community group.’

‘I acknowledge that I bring preconceived ideas to the research process. I will, however, ensure that I endeavour to be objective by following the methods undertaken by other in the field of phenomenology including in the way I shape the research, in the data collection and data analysis phase.’
Appendix H – Overview and evidence of coding

This appendix provides an overview and evidence of the data coding process used during the study.

Transcripts were assigned a pseudonym and line numbers inserted to assist in referencing data. Acknowledging the significance in phenomenological study for the researcher to immerse themselves in the data, transcripts and post interview notes were read through on numerous occasions and manually coded. The coding process was undertaken using the review function in Microsoft Word. The researcher looked for three categories of information, being, what was expected to be found, not expected to be found and what was unusual or conceptually interesting. Using the comment function, memos were added to significant statements and quotes, surmising sections of the participant’s responses.

The memos and corresponding quotes were transferred to a table. An example is presented in Table H-1. The memos were used to create a link between data and creation of codes. Codes were freely assigned to each statement.

Table H-1: Coding individual transcripts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LINE</th>
<th>QUOTE</th>
<th>MEMO</th>
<th>CODE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>my understanding of Australian local government has come purely from the role I’ve actually been in</td>
<td>Understanding of CE has come from professional experience</td>
<td>Experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>but I lived in an established town and there was nothing, I can’t recall, anything in particular or us being asked our opinions</td>
<td>Exposure to CE limited by personal circumstances</td>
<td>Experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36</td>
<td>I have come late to community activism and political activism</td>
<td>Active interest in community participation</td>
<td>Experiences Motivator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38</td>
<td>I have certainly participated in a professional capacity</td>
<td>Participated in CE in a professional capacity</td>
<td>Experience Motivator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40</td>
<td>I’ve never particularly felt as if I’ve had a an influential role where I could sway a decision which was going to be made</td>
<td>Did not feel she could influence decisions</td>
<td>Impact Motivator Influence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>58</td>
<td>I think that should I rock up to anything people would know [...] so there may be a bit of, I don’t</td>
<td>Does not participate in CE</td>
<td>Impact Experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Page</td>
<td>Text</td>
<td>Relevant Terms</td>
<td>Type</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>61</td>
<td>I mean I participated in things that are separate to council, the coal seam gas stuff, environmental concerned</td>
<td>Participates in things that are not associated with Council</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>67</td>
<td>I probably allowed him to be the voice, our voice on that, I encouraged him to participate because he was so vocal about it, but I personally didn’t, because I find it difficult, that kind of conflict</td>
<td>Encouraged husband to be her voice in Council CE activities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>68</td>
<td>how are you going to qualify that, quantify that, you know, and that’s what I want, these are all lovely nice words about public concerns and aspirations, consistent and considering people, but they are words, how do they translate into actions and I think that’s what concerns me most</td>
<td>Nothing explains how feedback is used</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>69</td>
<td>my name appearing on a record of submissions because I’ve seen it happening with other members</td>
<td>Doesn’t want her name on the record due to perception</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>79</td>
<td>I guess the council makes decisions on a number of different levels and I mean by the scale of the project</td>
<td>Broad understanding of Council decisions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>88</td>
<td>councillors are making political decisions, where as they are making political decisions you've got the general manager and perhaps even the Lord mayor to a certain extent making organisational decisions as well</td>
<td>Decisions made for political or organisational reasons</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>91</td>
<td>so you sometimes wonder whether the opinions of the community are really reflected in the decision making process</td>
<td>Wonder if opinions of community are reflected in decisions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>92</td>
<td>and that the experiences that I’ve found over the years, where it seem to me that there’s quite clearly a strength of feeling on a certain thing but it doesn’t matter because a decision is going to be made anyway</td>
<td>Opinions not always reflected in final decision</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>96</td>
<td>they have been politically elected but they are not solely working for the communities benefit, and I think that’s what concerns me, that they are not partial</td>
<td>Councillors are elected representatives but they are not impartial</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>99</td>
<td>community representatives on certain decision making, that they could be privy to that, but I guess the whole problem is how objective can a person be</td>
<td>Idea for better representation however problematic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>109</td>
<td>have a greater knowledge than people external to that, and I mean that could be other community members who live out of that area, or representative councillors or council staff as well. You have no idea what goes on in the day to day unless you’re living it and I think then that local people sometimes have a greater idea</td>
<td>Draw on the knowledge of the community who live in the area</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>they are using traffic model for things but they are not using really life examples and scenarios. Computer modelling</td>
<td>Benefits of CE</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Line</td>
<td>Text</td>
<td>Passionate about CE</td>
<td>Experience Roles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>---------------------</td>
<td>------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>148</td>
<td>community engagement is something I am very passionate about</td>
<td>CE</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>152</td>
<td>I think it is an opportunity for lip service to talk about other stuff that’s not really relevant</td>
<td>CE as lip service</td>
<td>Tokenistic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>153</td>
<td>professional capacity it about talking to the community but it also about listening to them and taking their ideas on board</td>
<td>CE a conversation, talking listening to community, taking on board ideas</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>154</td>
<td>the system fails to a certain extent</td>
<td>The system fails</td>
<td>Theory vs practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>155</td>
<td>I know it’s not always practical to take on the opinions of the community because yes, it’s just not practical to do it</td>
<td>Not always practical to take on board opinions</td>
<td>Challenge Theory vs practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>158</td>
<td>more engaged than I have ever been in community issues, I am making a point of doing that as best as I can</td>
<td>Becoming more involved in community issues</td>
<td>Motivator Roles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>159</td>
<td>much have a very bureaucratic sort of regime which people seem to cow down to</td>
<td>Bureaucratic regime</td>
<td>Theory vs practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>161</td>
<td>not having any great influence in the decision making</td>
<td>No significant influence</td>
<td>Influence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>162</td>
<td>because the systems of politics, the levels of government will always dominate</td>
<td>The systems of politics dominate</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>166</td>
<td>Inform means you’re just basically notifying, your telling someone some information</td>
<td>Inform – notifying, providing information</td>
<td>Inform Definition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>169</td>
<td>involve, um, I’d say again, it’s a step above consult, the conversations at a different sort of level you may be asking them for opinions, your actively asking them to be actively involved in something, um , so the level of influence I guess, should be greater, emphasis on should be greater</td>
<td>Involve – a step above consult, should be a greater level of influence</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>172</td>
<td>collaborate side of things there is less of a power imbalance, you should be more of an equal, so as a council officer coming in and a community member coming in, in an ideal world, they should have equal say in what’s happen base don’t eh knowledge and experience they have and then coming to working to something jointly and cooperatively to get to some sort of mutually, not mutually beneficial, but, to come to some sort of agreement on a decisions</td>
<td>Collaborate - Less power imbalance, equal say, agreement of decision</td>
<td>Collaborate Definition Roles Influence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>176</td>
<td>consult, means you’re having a bit more of conversation about it, you might take some suggestions on board and perhaps adapt whatever plan or decision you’re having to make, there’s no guarantee on that</td>
<td>Consult – taking some suggestions on board, no guarantee</td>
<td>Consult Definition Roles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>177</td>
<td>With empowerment then I see more that the council officer would step back from that and let the community member stand forward and be more responsible for the decisions making, perhaps have an advisory role in the back ground, the council officer, but the community member who is making the decisions, they are asking the questions and they are deciding the solutions trying to find the answers on things, that is my kind of take on it.</td>
<td>Empower – community responsible for decision</td>
<td>Empower Definition Roles Influence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>184</td>
<td>I think the spectrum is an idealise form of</td>
<td>Spectrum is an</td>
<td>Theory vs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Page</td>
<td>Text</td>
<td>Idealisation</td>
<td>Inconsistency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>---------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>188</td>
<td>Now again, that is based on the decisions we make. I guess within the organisation but also the willingness the organisation has to actively involve the community. CE is influenced by the types of decision needed to be made and the willingness of the organisation to involve the community.</td>
<td>Inconsistency</td>
<td>Influence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>195</td>
<td>in real terms is not what CE is all about. Should be Spectrum not what CE is all about.</td>
<td>Inconsistency</td>
<td>Definition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>201</td>
<td>participation to me should be a two way process, inform isn’t a two way process</td>
<td>Inform</td>
<td>Definition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>202</td>
<td>I think inform could be cut off the spectrum to a certain extent Inform could be cut from the spectrum</td>
<td>Inform</td>
<td>Theory vs practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>203</td>
<td>it goes more stakeholder management CE as stakeholder management Theory vs practice</td>
<td>Theory vs practice</td>
<td>Challenge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>208</td>
<td>think there is a bit of overlap between consult, like I said involve is a slightly higher up the scale, the level perhaps of involvement and influence is higher but only a wee bit, there is not a great distinction between the two No great distinction between involve and consult</td>
<td>Inconsistency</td>
<td>Influence Consult Involve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>212</td>
<td>it does actually say that we are processing what we are listening to and actually you know transforming that into actions No indication of what happens to feedback</td>
<td>Influence</td>
<td>Feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>217</td>
<td>great value and I think we know that from firsthand experience CE is valuable Value Experience</td>
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<tr>
<td>228</td>
<td>I think obviously [Council] had a bad history and that has been well and truly talked about and gone on about for years ICAC reference ICAC</td>
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<td>260</td>
<td>which I think is realistic because we don’t, we can’t really empower the community, so they certainly align Empower Council cant empower the community Definition Empower Inconsistency Roles</td>
<td>Inconsistency</td>
<td>Roles</td>
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<tr>
<td>263</td>
<td>I know that is all down to resources a lot of the time or decision that are out of our hands CE is down to resources Inconsistency Influence</td>
<td>Inconsistency</td>
<td>Influence</td>
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<tr>
<td>269</td>
<td>inform, and to me that is not engagement Inconsistency in policy and practice Definition Inform Theory vs practice</td>
<td>Definition</td>
<td>Theory vs practice</td>
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<tr>
<td>282</td>
<td>business, you know local government, you have a set limit, a budget you get things you need to deliver, you need to make decisions and within that then it’s pretty tight because moneys go to get spent, its go to get done a certain way Restrictions in CE delivery Questions influence Inconsistency Roles Influence</td>
<td>Inconsistency</td>
<td>Influence</td>
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<tr>
<td>283</td>
<td>there’s really good theory but how that translates into practice is questionable Theory and practice different Theory vs practice Challenge</td>
<td>Theory vs practice</td>
<td>Challenge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>289</td>
<td>the IAP2 spectrum is great starting Spectrum is a starting point, not the gospel Theory vs practice Definition</td>
<td>Theory vs practice</td>
<td>Definition</td>
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<tr>
<td>292</td>
<td>but I think how does to really translate into practice Theory into practice</td>
<td>Theory vs practice</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>298</td>
<td>but what is going to happen with that information, Poor at making it</td>
<td>Challenges</td>
<td></td>
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</table>
and I think [...] very poor at making clear, [...] say have your say please make comment but don’t make it explicit what [...] are going to do with that comment, how much of an impact, how much of an influence can it really have

| 302 | is it all lip service, is it all tokenism | Lip service, tokenistic | Tokenistic |
| 305 | the community making decision on certain aspects of the project and then making massive savings in cost | Benefit of CE organisation saves money | Roles Influence Value |
| 318 | you’re just thinking what was the communities role in that, I don’t know, and we keep going back this work of influence | What is community’s role, what is their Influence? | Roles Influence |
| 325 | if we are talking specifically decision making, does it influence decision making and if so how much | Influence | Influence Quantity |
| 328 | because the regulations say we have to do it | CE undertaken to meet regulations | Tokenistic |

Each transcript was coded in its entirety before moving to the next transcript. Once all transcripts were coded, the transcripts, memos and codes were analysed collectively. The codes allocated to each memo were refined and higher order codes established. The data was grouped using the higher order codes and quotes and memos considered in a cluster as presented in Table H-2. From these clusters the themes were established.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>THEME</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The role of personal experience and interests in understanding Council decisions</td>
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<td>CODE</td>
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<tr>
<td>Experience Home ownership</td>
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<tr>
<td>Experience Worked for Council</td>
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<td>Experience Employer in partnership with Councils</td>
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<td>Experience Involved from a young age</td>
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<td>Experience Professional relationship with various local governments</td>
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<td>Experience Ran for Council</td>
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<td>Experience Considerable involvement with Council in a variety of roles</td>
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<tr>
<td>Experience Exhibition of a policy developed from a top down approach</td>
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<tr>
<td>Experience Worked for Local Government</td>
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<td>Experience Voted</td>
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<td>Experience Pay rates</td>
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<tr>
<td>Experience Interactions with Council in relation to building a house</td>
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<tr>
<td>Experience Aware of Council responsibilities - participation at summit</td>
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<tr>
<td>Experience Understanding of CE has come from professional</td>
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